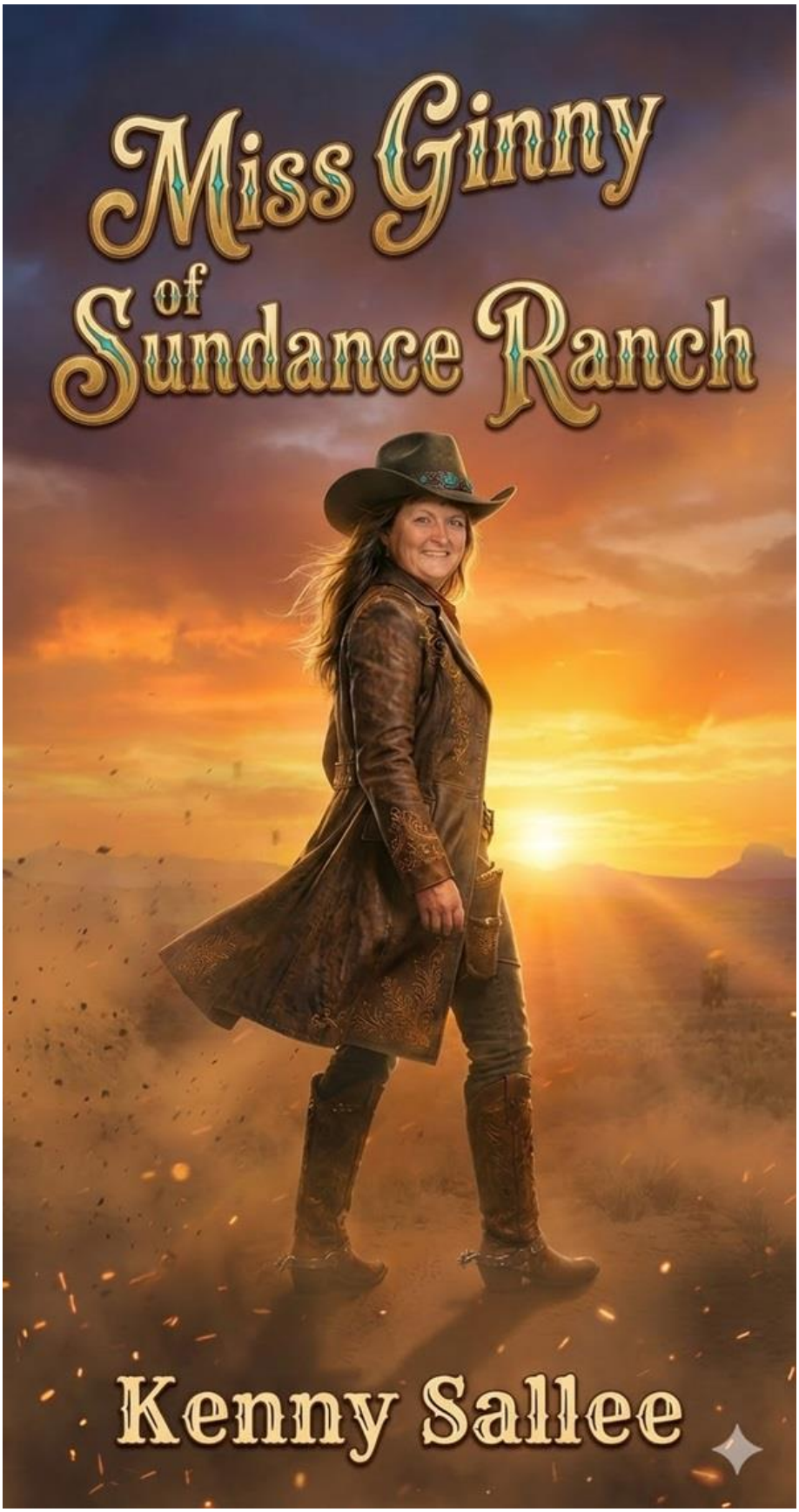
Miss Ginny
of
Sundance Ranch
Kenny Sallee

Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch

A Western Romance of Love, Faith, and Homecoming

Kenny Sallee

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Cover image by the author.

First edition.

For Ginny,
who inspired this story,
and whose spirit shines through every page.

Author's Note

Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch began with an image that stirred both imagination and heart. What followed was the writing of a fictional western romance shaped by love, faith, courage, and the enduring beauty of finding home in another person.

This is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by a spirit strong enough to breathe life into these pages. In many ways, this story is a tribute to grace, companionship, and the kind of love that remains steady through all seasons.

I hope you will find within these chapters a little beauty, a little tenderness, and the warm glow of a porch light still burning at day's end.

Kenny Sallee

Prologue: *Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch*

Folks in that part of the territory used to say the desert remembered everything.

It remembered hoofbeats long after the riders had vanished beyond the red hills. It remembered prayers whispered into the wind, promises spoken under starlight, and the names of the stubborn souls who had loved the land enough to stay when lesser hearts had turned back east. It remembered sorrow too, and grit, and the sort of loneliness that could hollow a person clean out if they weren't careful.

And if the desert remembered anyone at all, it remembered Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch.

She was a striking figure when seen from a distance, standing alone in the yard with the last light of day behind her. The wide brim of her hat cast a shadow over her face, but no shadow could hide the strength in her bearing. Her long coat stirred in the wind, and the silver conchos on her hatband caught the dying sun. Some called her beautiful. Others called her formidable. Most who knew better called her both.

Sundance Ranch lay beyond the town and the dusty road, where the land opened wide and honest under the New Mexico sky. It was not a grand place by the standards of wealthy cattlemen, but it had dignity. The fences were straight. The corrals were sound. The barn stood weathered but sturdy against the wind. Horses raised there were known for good spirit and steady feet. Even the cottonwoods near the wash seemed to lean protectively toward the house, as if they too knew the worth of the woman who kept the place.

There had been a time when Sundance was little more than a tired spread with broken boards, neglected stock, and too many bad memories clinging to it. Men had come and gone from the place, full of talk and short on staying power. The land had nearly been given up for lost more than once.

Then Miss Ginny came.

Some said she arrived with no more than a trunk, a Bible, a saddle, and enough determination to shame a room full of men. Others said she came west carrying old grief and a need for open sky. The truth, like most truths worth keeping, was known only in part. She did not speak much about the roads that had brought her there. She had learned long ago that pain told too often became a performance, and Ginny had no patience for performances.

What she had, instead, was resolve.

She learned the land as if it were a language God Himself had written into stone, mesquite, dust, and thorn. She learned where the water could still be found in dry months, which fence lines gave way in a hard wind, which mares needed a gentler hand, and which men in town could be trusted to speak plain. She mended what others had neglected. She sold what was no good, saved what could be saved, and planted herself in that hard country with the quiet certainty of a cottonwood root driving down toward hidden water.

The ranch changed under her care.

So did the talk about it.

By the second year, folks were saying Sundance had come back to life. By the third, they were saying Miss Ginny had a way with horses that bordered on the miraculous. By the fourth, even men who did not much care for women in authority had to admit that she ran the place better than most of them ran their own affairs. She hired carefully, expected a full day's work, paid fair when she could, and never asked anyone to do a chore she would not do herself.

It was not unusual to see her at first light with a shovel in hand, or in the saddle before breakfast checking the far pasture, or leaning over a sick foal in the dim lantern glow while the rest of the world slept. She was no stranger to toil. Work had shaped her hands and steadied her spirit.

But it was not labor alone that made people remember her.

It was the way she carried herself.

There was kindness in Miss Ginny, but it was not the weak sort. Hers was the kind that fed a hungry traveler before asking his name, sat beside a frightened child until tears gave out, and kept coffee warm for a ranch hand coming in late from the line shack. Yet there was steel in her too. She had no tolerance for cruelty, no use for drunks who mistook loudness for power, and no fear at all of looking a man in the eye and telling him exactly where he stood.

That was why Benton Crowe made his mistake.

Crowe was the kind of cattle baron who believed money and menace were the same thing. He owned more land than any one man needed and wanted more still. He had a polished way about him that fooled strangers and a rotten one that did not fool anyone who had lived long enough to know the look of greed in a tailored coat.

By the time his interest turned toward Sundance Ranch, he had already leaned on smaller outfits up and down the valley. One had sold for less than its worth after a season of missing cattle and cut fences. Another had folded when water rights were challenged in court by claims nobody quite believed but everybody feared to fight.

Crowe came to Sundance one windy afternoon with three riders behind him and a smile that did not reach his eyes.

Miss Ginny met him in the yard.

The sun was dropping westward, bronzing the desert and setting the mountain rim aflame. A bay gelding shifted in the corral. Somewhere in the distance a screen door banged at the bunkhouse and then went still. Ginny stood with one gloved hand resting lightly on the top rail of the fence, her hat low, her expression unreadable.

Crowe looked her over as though he were measuring a parcel of land.

“So,” he said, “you’re Miss Ginny.”

“I am.”

He dismounted with practiced ease and dusted his sleeves. “Benton Crowe.”

“I know who you are.”

That seemed to amuse him. He took a folded document from inside his coat and gave it a little wave. “Then you may know I’ve got legal claim to grazing rights that overlap this spread.”

Ginny did not reach for the paper. “Do you?”

“It would appear so.”

“Then I suppose you’ve come a long way to tell a lie.”

The men behind him shifted in their saddles.

Crowe’s smile thinned by a fraction. “You speak boldly.”

“I speak plainly.”

He glanced out over the ranch buildings, the corrals, the stock tank, the barn, all of it neat and well ordered in the golden light. “Would be a shame for a place like this to run into trouble.”

Ginny did not raise her voice. She did not need to.

“Then I suggest you keep trouble off my land.”

The wind hissed through the dry grass. Crowe held her gaze a moment longer, perhaps expecting the flicker of doubt, perhaps expecting her to remember that he was richer, meaner, and backed by men with guns. But there was no uncertainty in her face. Only calm.

At last he tucked the document away.

“You may hear from me again.”

“Then I’ll know where to send you back from.”

He gave a short laugh that had no warmth in it, remounted, and rode off with his men trailing behind him in a cloud of dust.

Ginny watched until they were gone.

She did not move for a while after that. The yard seemed strangely quiet, though the windmill still creaked and the horses still stirred and the same evening light still touched the boards of the house. A younger woman might have mistaken peace for safety. Ginny knew better.

When old Mateo, who had worked the ranch longer than anyone, came out from the barn, he took one look at her face and said, “He’ll come again.”

"Yes," she said. "He will."

And he did.

A week later, the south fence was cut in the night.

Two days after that, three head of cattle were missing from the north pasture.

Then word came from town that one of Crowe's riders had been boasting in the saloon that Sundance Ranch would soon belong to a man who could make proper use of it.

Miss Ginny answered none of it with panic.

She rode the boundary lines herself. She had the men check every hinge and latch. She kept a rifle near the back door and one in the tack room. She did her work, spoke little, prayed much, and watched everything.

Those were tense days at Sundance. Even the air seemed to carry warning. Dust devils spun across the range like restless spirits. Horses tossed their heads more than usual. At supper, conversation ran thin. Yet if the ranch hands looked to Miss Ginny hoping to read fear in her, they did not find it.

One evening, as the sun sank behind Red Mountain and painted the whole western sky with fire, young Tommy Vale came racing from the north trail on a lathered sorrel horse.

"Miss Ginny!" he shouted before he was even out of the saddle. "Riders coming hard from the draw!"

She was on the porch mending a bridle strap. She set it down at once and stood.

"How many?"

"Four, maybe five. Driving stock with 'em."

Mateo stepped out behind her, his lined face darkening. "Crowe."

Ginny nodded once. "Ring the bell."

The old iron bell by the bunkhouse began clanging across the yard, sharp and urgent. Hands came running from every direction. One man from the barn, another from the lower pasture gate, two more from the cookhouse where supper had only just been set out. Horses were saddled in a rush. Gates were swung shut and opened again. A herd of mares was pushed toward the back corral.

Miss Ginny crossed the yard with swift purpose. In the tack room she took down her rifle, checked it, then buckled on the revolver she seldom wore but had no hesitation in using if she must. Outside, the sky had gone molten with sunset, and the whole ranch seemed lit from within by some fierce final glow.

She mounted her dun mare in one smooth motion and turned toward the north edge of the property.

Tommy stared up at her, wide-eyed and breathless. "You think they'll fight?"

Ginny looked down at him. "I think men who steal in daylight hope nobody will stand up to them."

He swallowed. "And will we?"

A faint smile touched her mouth.

"Yes," she said. "We will."

She rode out with Mateo and two hands at her back, meeting the riders where the trail narrowed between a wash and a line of scrub oak. Dust boiled ahead of the stolen cattle. The men behind them were pushing hard, expecting panic, expecting confusion, expecting Sundance Ranch to fold like every other place Benton Crowe had threatened.

Instead, they found Miss Ginny waiting in the middle of the trail.

She sat her horse straight and sure, hat brim low against the sun. The light behind her turned the edges of her coat to flame.

The lead rider hauled up short. "Move aside, ma'am."

Ginny's gaze swept over the cattle and found the brand marks. Sundance stock. No mistaking them.

"You boys are on the wrong land with the wrong herd."

"We're just moving beeves."

"No," she said evenly. "You're stealing mine."

A nervous laugh came from one of the others, but it had no conviction in it.

Behind her, Mateo's rifle rested across his saddle horn. The other hands spread just enough to make their presence known. Not wild, not reckless—steady.

The lead rider's face hardened. "Best not make this difficult."

Miss Ginny's voice remained calm.

"Turn them around."

"Or what?"

The desert went still in that moment. Even the cattle seemed to hesitate.

Then one steer lurched sideways, unsettled by the tension. Another followed. The line began to wobble.

Ginny acted at once.

She urged her mare forward just enough to break their nerve while Mateo shouted and swung wide to the left. One of the ranch hands fired a warning shot into the air. The herd bellowed, split, and

turned in confusion. Dust exploded upward. Horses danced. One rustler cursed as his mount sidestepped hard. Another fought to hold his seat.

"Drive 'em back!" Mateo roared.

The Sundance hands moved like they had practiced the moment a hundred times, though none of them had. They cut the herd clean, turning the lead cattle toward home. The rustlers, suddenly outnumbered not by men but by determination, lost their taste for boldness. Within minutes they were retreating in a ragged line, their plan broken and their bravado gone thin as paper.

Miss Ginny rode only as far as the boundary, then stopped.

She watched them flee into the reddening dusk without firing after them.

Tommy, who had followed at a safe distance despite being told otherwise, came up breathless and flushed with excitement. "Did you see 'em run, Miss Ginny?"

She lowered her rifle.

"I did."

"You weren't scared?"

The question hung there in the cooling air.

Ginny turned in the saddle and looked back toward the ranch, where the cattle were settling and the first evening star had begun to shine above the darkening hills.

Then she looked at the boy.

"Being brave," she said, "doesn't mean you're not afraid. It means there's something you love enough to stand for anyway."

The story spread, as stories will.

By the time it reached town, Miss Ginny had faced down six men alone. By the next county over, she had supposedly fired her revolver so fast the desert itself echoed back in surrender. In one telling, Benton Crowe had been among the rustlers and had nearly fallen out of his saddle at the sight of her. In another, she had quoted scripture before turning the herd. Frontier people have never been known for making a tale smaller.

But the truth was enough.

Crowe did not come openly against Sundance again. Within the month, questions about his land claims found their way before a judge who had grown tired of seeing small ranchers squeezed by large appetites. One by one, the bluffs began to fail. Crowe's shadow receded from the valley, though not from memory.

Sundance Ranch stood.

And Miss Ginny, having defended it, went back to the plain work of living as if courage were simply another duty laid before her by God and the day.

Years later, folks still spoke of that season when the wind turned cool and the cottonwoods yellowed along the wash. They remembered how the desert looked at sunset, how the dust rose beneath the horses, how Miss Ginny had stood in the trail like she had been carved from the same red earth she loved.

And when strangers asked if the stories were true, the old-timers would smile and say the same thing.

"Every word of them. And not half enough."

Far out beyond the last fence of Sundance Ranch, the land rolled on beneath the stars, waiting.

It did not yet know that another rider would come.

A man with weather in his face, kindness in his hands, and a past of his own riding close behind him.

A man named Kenny.

But that was still down the trail.

For now, the desert remembered only this:

Miss Ginny stood her ground.

And Sundance Ranch was hers.

Chapter One: *The Heart of Sundance Ranch*

Morning came softly to Sundance Ranch.

Before the sun lifted itself over the far edge of the land, the sky had already begun to pale behind the Florida Mountains, turning from deep blue to violet, then to the faintest silver. The air held that fragile chill which belonged only to the desert at daybreak—a coolness that would be gone by midmorning, chased away by heat and hard light. Somewhere out near the wash, a coyote gave one last call to the fading night. Then all was still.

Miss Ginny was awake before the first bird.

She had long since grown used to rising while the world still slept. There was something sacred in those first quiet moments of morning, before boots struck the porch boards and wagon wheels creaked and voices carried across the yard. It was the one hour of the day that belonged to no one but God and the soul willing to meet Him there.

She stood now at the kitchen window with a cup of coffee warming her hands, looking out over the dark shape of the barn and the paling eastern sky. Her hair was pinned up loosely, not yet hidden beneath her hat, and she wore a plain work dress with a shawl around her shoulders. In the stillness, without the coat and boots and commanding presence that the day required, there was something softer about her. Not weaker. Never that. But quieter. More inward.

On the table behind her lay an open Bible, its pages marked by use and years. Beside it rested a small oil lamp, still burning low.

Ginny took a slow sip of coffee and whispered the verse she had read only moments before.

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

The words settled into her as naturally as breath.

The troubles with Benton Crowe had passed, at least outwardly. The fences were holding. The cattle were accounted for. The ranch hands had gone back to their chores without having to keep one eye always on the horizon. But Miss Ginny knew enough about life to understand that peace was not the same as the absence of trouble. Peace was something steadier. Something planted deeper.

Sundance Ranch had survived because it had roots.

And if that ranch had a heart, it beat in all the little things that outsiders never thought to notice.

It beat in the kitchen before dawn, where biscuits would soon be rolled and coffee poured strong enough to raise the dead. It beat in the barn where saddles hung, worn smooth by use and care. It beat in the callused hands of men who showed up when the bell rang, in the patient eyes of horses waiting at the rail, in the rows of canned peaches and green beans stored against leaner seasons. It beat in prayer, in laughter, in weathered boards, in fences mended instead of abandoned.

It beat, above all, in Miss Ginny herself.

By the time the first strip of sunlight broke over the horizon, she had tied on her apron and set breakfast in motion. Biscuit dough rested beneath her capable hands. Bacon crackled in the skillet. Beans warmed on the stove. More coffee was brewing. The kitchen filled with the smell of flour and grease and morning—the smell of workdays beginning.

Soon enough there came the familiar sounds of life beyond the house. A door opening at the bunkhouse. Boots on hard ground. Low voices. A cough. The scrape of a bucket. Then the barn cats appeared on the porch, as if summoned by scent alone, hopeful and shameless.

Ginny smiled despite herself and opened the back door.

"Well," she said to the boldest of the cats, "I see you survived another night of idleness."

The striped tom blinked up at her with complete indifference.

By the time the hands began filing in, the table was set.

Mateo came first, as he usually did, with the same measured stride and weathered expression that made him look as though he had been born fifty years old and simply remained there ever since. He removed his hat at the door, nodded to Ginny, and took his seat without ceremony.

"Mornin', Miss Ginny."

"Morning, Mateo."

Behind him came Eli Barnes, broad-shouldered and quiet; young Tommy Vale, trying and failing to look older than he was; and Jasper Reed, who talked enough for two men before breakfast and three after it.

Jasper sniffed the air and grinned. "If this don't smell like salvation, I don't know what does."

Ginny set the biscuit pan on the table. "Then I trust you'll receive it with gratitude."

Tommy laughed and reached for one too quickly, jerking his hand back when it burned his fingers.

Mateo gave him a dry look. "You'd think by now he'd know hot biscuits come out hot."

"Experience is a stern teacher," Ginny said.

Eli bowed his head. The others followed, and for a brief moment the noise gave way to reverent stillness as he said grace.

The day's work was discussed over breakfast in the practical language of ranch life. The north fence needed another look where one post had started leaning after the last wind. A mare in the east pen was favoring her left rear hoof. The water trough near the mesquite stand had gone low and would need checking. Two calves had wandered from where they ought to have been and must be found before noon heat drove them farther off.

There was comfort in the plainness of it.

No grand speeches. No drama. Just the business of keeping a place alive.

After breakfast, the ranch burst into motion.

Ginny exchanged apron for riding skirt, shawl for coat, soft house shoes for boots. By the time she stepped onto the porch again, hat settled in place, gloves on, the gentler figure from the kitchen had become once more the Miss Ginny Sundance Ranch depended upon. She moved across the yard with quiet authority, answering questions before they were fully asked, adjusting plans on the move, noticing everything.

She paused by the corral where the bay mare, Rosie, stood with one hind hoof cocked.

Tommy was already there, trying to appear competent while the mare watched him with deep suspicion.

"Did you lift the hoof?" Ginny asked.

"Yes'm," he said. "Didn't see a stone."

"Did you clean it?"

Tommy hesitated. "Not yet."

Ginny held out her hand.

He surrendered the hoof pick at once.

"Watch," she said.

She moved to Rosie's side, laid a steady hand on the mare's shoulder, and ran the other gently down the leg. Rosie yielded the hoof without fuss. Ginny cleaned it carefully, calm and unhurried, and after a moment drew out a small thorn lodged near the frog.

"There," she said.

Tommy leaned closer. "That little thing?"

"That little thing," Ginny said, "can make a thousand-pound animal miserable."

She set the hoof down and stroked Rosie's neck. "Trouble is often smaller than it first appears. But you still have to look close to find it."

Tommy nodded as though she had handed him some rare wisdom from a mountaintop.

To him, perhaps she had.

The morning passed beneath a widening sky of flawless blue. Eli and Jasper rode south to check the line. Mateo headed for the troughs. Tommy was sent, with much instruction and a little groaning, to help patch a gate hinge that ought to have been fixed properly the week before. Ginny herself rode

westward along the far pasture, where the land rolled gently before breaking toward lower scrub and sandy draw.

The desert was beautiful in a way that demanded patience.

It did not offer itself all at once like greener country. A man in a hurry might see only dust, thorn, and distance. But Ginny had learned its subtler ways. She noticed the shimmer of rabbitbrush in bloom, the purple cast of distant mountains in morning light, the bravery of wildflowers blooming where no one had planted them. She knew where quail liked to hide and where rainwater sometimes gathered after a storm. She knew the smell of creosote after moisture, the sound of wind changing direction, and the look of clouds that meant trouble by sundown.

This was hard land.

But it was holy too.

At midmorning she came upon the two missing calves near a shallow dip scattered with mesquite. They had wandered farther than expected and were standing in awkward innocence as if they had not caused the slightest inconvenience to anyone. Ginny shook her head.

"You two are blessed to be handsome."

She turned them back toward the pasture and rode slowly behind, keeping them moving.

By the time she returned to the ranch, the sun was high and heat had settled over everything like a heavy hand. The yard shimmered faintly. A hawk circled above the barn. From the kitchen drifted the scent of stew reheating for dinner.

Mateo was waiting near the trough by the house.

"North post is fixed," he said. "Water line's holdin'. But we got tracks near the west arroyo."

Ginny dismounted in one smooth motion. "Fresh?"

"This morning, maybe late last night."

"Stock?"

He shook his head. "Horse."

That gave her pause.

Crowe's men were gone, at least openly, and drifters were nothing new. Roads carried all kinds west and east. Yet something in Mateo's tone told her he had not mentioned it lightly.

"How many?"

"One rider."

She loosened Rosie's cinch and handed the reins to Tommy, who had appeared from nowhere the moment there was anything interesting to overhear.

"Any sign where he was headed?"

Mateo glanced toward the horizon. "Toward the ridge. Maybe just passing through."

"Maybe."

Ginny said nothing more then, but she carried the thought with her through dinner and into the afternoon.

A lone rider was not necessarily cause for concern. Still, ranch life had taught her that trouble rarely announced itself with a brass band. Sometimes it began as nothing more than a set of tracks in dry ground.

The rest of the day went on much as days do, whether or not a person is entirely easy in spirit. There were accounts to reckon with, tack to inspect, feed to measure, and a letter to write to a supplier in town who had once again sent nails of such poor quality that they bent if a man looked at them too sternly. Ginny sat at the desk in the front room for a time, spectacles low on her nose, figures laid out carefully before her.

From outside came the ordinary sounds of labor. Hammering. Hooves. Men calling to each other. Wind against the porch screen.

This, too, was the heart of Sundance Ranch.

Not romance. Not legend. Not the kind of tale people preferred to retell in town.

Its heart was steadiness.

Late in the afternoon, when the worst of the heat had begun to ease, Ginny walked down to the barn to check on a new litter of barn kittens tucked into a bale niche their mother had claimed as a kingdom. Tommy was there, crouched nearby, trying to coax one of them into his hat.

"They ain't old enough," Ginny said.

He looked up guiltily. "I was just seeing if this one liked me."

"Does it?"

The tiny kitten hissed with ridiculous ferocity.

Tommy sighed. "Not especially."

Ginny laughed softly. "Some hearts take longer to win than others."

She left him there and stepped out into the lowering light.

Evening came golden across Sundance Ranch.

The chores began to close down. Horses were unsaddled and rubbed out. The cookstove was fired again. Shadows lengthened from the corrals and stretched across the yard. Far beyond the pastures, the sky turned the color of old amber, and the mountains stood purple and still, like watchmen at the edge of the world.

Ginny climbed the small rise behind the house, as she often did at day's end.

From there she could see nearly all of Sundance—the barn roof catching light, the rails of the corrals, the bunkhouse, the well, the open pasture running out toward the desert. It was not a grand empire. It was better than that. It was real. Built board by board, chore by chore, prayer by prayer.

She folded her arms against the evening breeze and stood in silence.

This was what she had fought for.

Not glory.

Not reputation.

This.

A place where work meant something. A place where the weary could find bread and the honest could find purpose. A place where life, though hard, was still good.

Down below, Jasper's laughter rose from the yard. Mateo was speaking to Eli near the barn. Tommy chased a chicken out of someplace it did not belong, with more commotion than success. The whole ranch settled into its nightly rhythm, held together by care more than command.

And yet, as she stood there, Ginny found her gaze drifting west.

Toward the ridge.

Toward the place where Mateo had said the lone rider's tracks had passed.

The desert beyond Sundance Ranch looked peaceful in that hour, washed in sunset and deepening blue. But trails met other trails out there. Roads crossed. Strangers came. Lives changed.

She did not know why she lingered looking that way.

Only that she did.

Then the dinner bell rang, carrying warm and clear through the evening air, and the spell of thought broke.

Ginny turned and started back down toward the house, toward lamplight and supper and the familiar company of the ranch. But somewhere beyond the last fence line, beyond the known and ordinary, a rider was out there beneath the same broad sky.

And though Sundance Ranch did not know it yet, something had already begun to move toward it.

Not trouble this time.

Something else.

Something written by God in roads, timing, and the quiet turning of lonely hearts.

The heart of Sundance Ranch beat on, steady and strong.

Waiting.

Chapter Two: *When Kenny Rode Into Sundance*

The rider came into Sundance country near the close of day.

All afternoon the wind had moved across the open land in long, restless breaths, bending the dry grass and stirring pale dust along the trail. The sun had begun its slow descent toward the western rim, pouring amber light over the desert until every fence rail, mesquite branch, and distant rise looked touched by fire. Shadows stretched thin and long over the earth.

Out beyond the last known homesteads, a lone man rode steadily west to east, his horse travel-worn but game, its ears flicking now and then at the sound of wind and saddle leather.

The man sat easy, though not lazily, as one who had spent more of his life in a saddle than out of one. He was broad through the shoulders, sun-browned, and no longer young, yet there was strength in him that had not gone soft with years. His hat brim shaded his face, but not enough to hide the weather in it. Time had marked him with lines at the eyes and around the mouth—the sort earned by hard seasons, sorrow, laughter that had once come easier, and the long patience of a man who had learned to keep going whether the road welcomed him or not.

His name was Kenny.

He had not started out that morning meaning to find Sundance Ranch.

Truth be told, he had started out meaning only to keep moving.

For some time now, movement had been easier than stopping. A trail did not ask many questions. It did not press a man to explain his losses or measure what was left of his heart. It only asked whether he could ride one more mile, then one more after that. Kenny had grown used to such bargains.

Still, as the day wore on, he found himself thinking more than he cared to.

He thought about the years behind him, scattered like old hoofprints over too many places. He thought of camps and churches, towns half remembered, and faces long gone from this world. He thought of prayers said over graves and promises made in quieter days. He thought of how strange it was that a man could spend so much of his life serving others and still find himself, now and then, with no clear answer as to where he himself belonged.

The trail bent south around a dry wash, then lifted toward a ridge line.

At the top, Kenny reined in.

Before him the land opened wide, and there below lay a ranch.

Not a grand spread, not the sort built to impress strangers with white-painted fences and more money than sense. This place had a truer look to it. Corrals stood straight. Barn roof weathered but sound. A windmill turned slow in the evening breeze. Cattle grazed in the nearer pasture, and smoke rose in a thin gray ribbon from the chimney of the house. The whole place seemed held together not by wealth but by care.

Kenny sat quietly a moment, taking it in.

There are some places a man sees and immediately knows whether they were built by pride, neglect, or love.

This one, he thought, had been built by love.

His horse shifted beneath him, tired from the road.

"You and me both could use water," Kenny murmured.

He touched his heels lightly to the gelding's flanks and started down.

Below, Sundance Ranch was settling into evening. Horses had been rubbed down and turned out. The cookfire was going. The day's last chores were being finished before full dark. The sound of a hammer rang once near the barn, then stopped. Somewhere a dog barked, more out of duty than alarm.

Tommy Vale was the first to spot the rider.

He was carrying a bucket from the pump when he froze mid-step and squinted toward the western trail.

"Rider coming!"

The call carried quick across the yard.

Mateo looked up from checking a gate latch. Eli straightened from the tack room doorway. Jasper came around the barn corner wiping his hands on a rag as though hoping, by Providence, that the rider might bring interesting trouble.

Miss Ginny stepped out onto the porch.

She did not hurry. She did not call out. She only stood there, one hand resting lightly on the porch post, and watched as the stranger rode nearer through the lowering light.

Even at a distance she could tell certain things. He handled his horse well. He did not ride like a man fleeing anything in immediate panic, nor like one coming to make a show. His posture was alert but not aggressive. His clothes carried the dust of the trail, and there was wear in them, but he sat his saddle with dignity.

By the time he reached the yard, the ranch had gone still.

Kenny brought the gelding to a halt a respectful distance from the porch, then removed his hat.

"Evening," he said.

His voice was low and steady, touched by miles and weather.

"Evening," Miss Ginny replied.

For one quiet moment they simply regarded each other.

Tommy noticed first that the rider had kind eyes. Jasper noticed he carried himself like a man who could handle trouble. Mateo noticed, as Mateo noticed everything, that the horse was thirsty, the saddle well kept despite long travel, and the rider careful with his words.

Ginny noticed all of that too.

She also noticed the weariness he carried.

Not weakness. Not self-pity.

Weariness.

The kind that lives deep.

Kenny glanced toward the pump, then back to the porch. "I don't suppose a traveler might trouble you for water?"

Ginny answered at once. "A thirsty man and horse are no trouble here."

Something softened in his face—not relief exactly, but gratitude that had seen too many days when kindness was not guaranteed.

"Much obliged."

Tommy needed no further instruction. He set down the bucket he was holding and hurried forward to help with the horse, trying very hard to look older and more experienced than he was. Kenny dismounted with the controlled stiffness of a man who had been in the saddle all day and felt every mile of it.

He handed the reins over carefully.

"Easy with him," he said. "He's honest, just tired."

Tommy nodded with solemn importance. "Yes, sir."

Kenny stepped toward the pump, splashed water over his hands and face, then drank from the dipper offered him. When he lowered it again, the ranch water glinting on his beard and jaw, he looked somehow more real than before—as if the road dust had hidden part of him and the simple act of washing had brought him back into clearer focus.

"Thank you," he said.

Ginny inclined her head. "You've come a fair distance."

"Far enough."

"That usually means farther than a man first planned."

A corner of his mouth moved, almost a smile. "That's true."

Jasper, who believed silence should never be allowed to grow unchecked, crossed his arms and asked, "You passin' through, mister, or lookin' for work?"

Mateo gave him a look that plainly suggested he let the man breathe first.

But Kenny answered without offense.

"That depends whether this place has use for an extra pair of hands."

Tommy's eyes widened. Eli said nothing, but his attention sharpened.

Miss Ginny stepped down from the porch.

She did not descend like a lady coming delicately into a parlor. She came as the mistress of Sundance Ranch, boots sure on the wooden steps, coat stirred by the breeze, sunset along the brim of her hat. When she reached the yard, she stopped a few feet from the stranger and studied him in the open way of someone long accustomed to judging character for practical survival.

"What kind of work do you do?" she asked.

Kenny met her gaze.

"Whatever's needed."

"That is what drifters say when they've done little."

A faint spark lit in his eyes then, not of offense but of spirit.

"I've mended fence, broke horses, worked cattle, hauled feed, fixed tack, dug postholes, cleaned stalls, and slept in worse places than most men would admit to in church."

Tommy tried not to grin and failed.

Ginny's expression remained calm, though inwardly she marked the answer. There had been no swagger in it. Only plain speech.

"Can you shoe a horse?"

"Well enough not to lame him."

"Drive a team?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Fix a pump?"

"If it wants fixing and not burying."

This time she did allow the smallest hint of amusement.

"And if I asked in town what sort of man Kenny is, what would I hear?"

The evening wind moved between them.

Kenny glanced down for the briefest moment, then back at her.

"You'd hear different things depending on who you asked." He paused. "Some would tell you I work hard. Some would say I talk scripture too much when the coffee is strong. Some might say I've carried too much sorrow and not always gracefully. But nobody honest would tell you I stole, lied, or walked away from work I'd given my word to do."

The quiet after that answer seemed deeper than before.

Mateo's face gave nothing away, but inwardly he approved. Jasper looked disappointed there was no dramatic tale of outlawry. Tommy, for reasons he could not yet have explained, liked the stranger immediately.

Ginny studied him a moment longer.

"What brings you this way?"

Kenny looked toward the western sky, now turning from gold to rose.

"Road brought me," he said. Then, after a pause: "And maybe the Lord."

That was not the sort of answer a practiced liar gave.

Not usually.

Ginny folded her hands lightly at her waist. "The Lord has a habit of sending people where they're needed. Though He doesn't always warn either party first."

Kenny's weary face finally gave way to a real smile, quiet and warm and gone almost before it had fully settled.

"No, ma'am," he said. "He surely doesn't."

For one strange instant, the whole yard seemed to still around them.

It was not romance. Not yet.

It was only recognition.

Something in one spirit pausing when it met another.

Then Jasper cleared his throat loudly, ruining the moment by existing exactly as he was.

"So," he said, "are we hirin' him or just admirin' him in the sunset?"

Tommy nearly choked. Eli looked down to hide a smile. Mateo muttered something in Spanish under his breath that sounded suspiciously like a prayer for patience.

Ginny ignored them all.

"You eaten?" she asked Kenny.

"Not since midday."

"Then you'll have supper first. Work can be discussed after a man's been fed."

"That's generous."

"It's practical. Hungry men answer poorly."

He dipped his head. "Can't argue with that."

She turned toward the house. "Tommy, see to the horse. Water first. Then oats, but not too much all at once."

"Yes'm."

"Jasper, wash before you come in."

Jasper looked mildly wounded. "I was plannin' to."

"No," said Mateo flatly, "you weren't."

The men began moving again, the spell broken into ordinary life.

Kenny followed Miss Ginny toward the porch, not too near and not too far behind. As he stepped up, he glanced once across the yard where the evening had settled golden over barn boards and corral rails. There was laughter now—Tommy's, mostly. The smell of supper drifted from the kitchen. Horses stamped softly in the near pen. It was the kind of scene a man might pass a hundred times and think nothing of unless some aching part of him had long missed it.

Something in Kenny tightened unexpectedly in his chest.

Home, he thought.

Not because this was his.

Because he remembered what the shape of it looked like.

Inside, the kitchen glowed with lamplight and warmth. Ginny set an extra place at the table as if such things were the simplest matter in the world. There was stew, bread, beans, and coffee strong enough to wake memory itself. Kenny removed his hat and sat where she indicated, suddenly conscious of how long it had been since he'd taken a meal in a room that felt less like shelter and more like belonging.

The conversation over supper was easy in the way of people used to each other. Jasper supplied more than enough words for the table. Tommy asked Kenny where he had come from, then where he had been before that, and before that, until Ginny told him a man was not a geography lesson to be quizzed before dessert. Eli spoke little, but when he did, it was sensible. Mateo listened. Ginny asked the sort of questions that mattered and none that did not.

Kenny answered plainly.

He had worked ranches in three territories. Done some hauling. Some ministry too, in small places where folks needed prayer as much as they needed rain. He knew cattle, horses, tools, weather, and people enough to know they were all unpredictable. He had no wife traveling with him, no children waiting farther down the road, and no fixed arrangement beyond the next day unless one was offered.

That last part quieted the table a little.

Not from suspicion.

From understanding.

A life can narrow down to tomorrow faster than most people imagine.

When supper was finished, Kenny stood as if by instinct to help clear, but Ginny waved him back down.

"Guest first," she said.

He hesitated. "And after that?"

Her eyes met his over the lamplit room.

"After that, we'll see."

Later, once the dishes were done and the night had deepened outside, Miss Ginny found Kenny alone on the porch.

The stars had come out clean and bright over the ranch. The air had cooled. Somewhere from the barn came the quiet shifting of horses settling in. Lamplight spilled golden from the kitchen window and touched the porch boards between them.

Kenny stood with one hand resting on the railing, looking out across the darkened yard.

"It's a good place," he said when she stepped beside him.

"It is."

"You built it that way."

"We all did."

He nodded, accepting the correction. "Still."

For a moment neither spoke.

Then Ginny said, "I can use another hand for a spell. Wages aren't extravagant. Work is steady. Expectations are plain."

Kenny turned toward her.

"And those expectations are?"

"Honesty. Labor. Respect. No drinking yourself foolish. No meanness to animals. No trouble brought onto this land if it can be helped."

A soft breath that might almost have been a laugh left him.

"That all?"

"For now."

He looked at her then with a seriousness that made the shadows seem to draw back a little.

"I can give you those."

Ginny held his gaze. She had hired men before. Good ones, lazy ones, broken ones, dangerous ones who hid it badly, wounded ones who hid it well. She had learned to read the spirit behind the face. And though she knew better than to trust quickly simply because kindness answered kindness, something in her said this man was not false.

"You can have the bunk by the east wall," she said. "Breakfast comes early."

"I'm used to early."

"You're not used to my coffee."

At that, he smiled again—that quiet, worn smile of his that seemed all the warmer for not being shown carelessly.

"I'll take my chances."

She nodded once. "Then welcome to Sundance Ranch, Kenny."

There was no grand flourish to it. No music but the wind in the dark. No witness but the stars and the sleeping ranch.

Yet something settled into place at those words.

Welcome to Sundance Ranch.

A beginning.

Kenny lowered his head slightly, not in submission but gratitude.

"Thank you, Miss Ginny."

She turned to go inside, then paused at the door and glanced back at him.

"Rest while you can," she said. "Tommy will likely have twelve questions for you before noon."

Kenny looked toward the bunkhouse where faint laughter still rose through the night air.

"Twelve?"

"That would be a merciful estimate."

She disappeared inside before he could answer.

Left alone on the porch, Kenny rested both hands on the railing and looked out again over the ranch. Moonlight silvered the corrals. The windmill turned slow and steady against the stars. Somewhere in the darkness a horse blew softly, content and unafraid.

He had meant only to pass through.

That had been the honest truth.

But now, with the taste of strong coffee still lingering, and the sound of Miss Ginny's voice somehow remaining in the air after she was gone, and the feel of the place settling around him like something older than chance, he found himself wondering if the road had known better than he had.

Out in the kitchen, Ginny paused a moment by the window before turning down the lamp.

Across the yard she could see the porch in outline, and the man standing there beneath the stars.

A stranger no longer, though not yet familiar.

Kenny.

There was steadiness in him. Sadness too. And kindness, if she read rightly.

The kindest people, she knew, were often the ones who had suffered enough to choose gentleness on purpose.

She drew the curtain then and left the thought alone.

Outside, the night deepened over Sundance Ranch.

The horses slept.
The wind moved softly over the open land.
And in the quiet heart of that western place, two lives that had traveled long by separate roads came to rest, for the first time, under the same sky.

Neither of them knew yet what the Lord might make of that.

But the story had begun.

Chapter Three: *The Cowboy Named Kenny*

By the third morning, Sundance Ranch had already begun to measure Kenny in the quiet ways a ranch always measures a new man.

Not by what he claimed.

Not by the stories he told over coffee.

Not by the hat he wore, the miles he had ridden, or the look in his eyes when he thought nobody noticed.

A ranch measured a man by whether he rose before dawn without complaint, whether he latched a gate behind him, whether he watered his horse before himself, whether he treated tools like companions instead of burdens, whether he did the hard chore when nobody was there to praise him for it.

In such matters, Kenny said very little.

But what he did said enough.

The first morning after his arrival, Tommy had expected to be the one to rouse him.

Instead, when the boy stumbled half awake into the yard rubbing sleep from his eyes, he found the new hand already at the pump, sleeves rolled, face freshly washed, hat settled in place, and a bucket in each hand.

Tommy stopped short.

"You're up already?"

Kenny glanced over. "Been up."

Tommy frowned as though personally offended. "It ain't even proper morning."

Kenny looked toward the east, where the first thin ribbon of light had barely touched the horizon. "Morning enough for horses."

Tommy considered this and, finding no good argument, yawned instead.

By breakfast, Mateo had noticed that the new man ate like someone who respected food and understood work. Eli had noticed that Kenny listened more than he talked. Jasper had noticed that he sharpened a knife properly and therefore, in Jasper's opinion, could not be all bad. Miss Ginny noticed all of it, though she gave no sign beyond sending him out after breakfast with Mateo to mend a washout section of fence on the north line.

It was a test, though not an unfair one.

Mateo was the steadiest hand on the place and the least impressed by easy charm. He had seen drifters come in speaking sweetly and leave with a saddle blanket, a borrowed knife, and a good mule gone missing. If a man earned Mateo's respect, he had earned something real.

The two rode out under a pale gold sunrise with tools strapped behind the saddles.

For a good while they said little.

Kenny did not seem troubled by silence, which Mateo appreciated. There were men who talked because they were nervous, men who talked because they wanted to impress, and men who talked because they feared what might come up in themselves if the world grew too still. Kenny, Mateo thought, belonged to none of those sorts. His quiet was not emptiness. It was habitation.

At last Mateo said, "You've worked cattle long?"

"Long enough to know they don't appreciate it."

Mateo grunted, which might have been amusement.

They rode another stretch.

"You've got some miles on you," Mateo said.

Kenny tipped his hat back a little against the sun. "I've got a few."

"Running from something?"

Kenny did not answer at once.

Mateo waited, unbothered. Desert men knew better than to crowd truth before it was ready.

Finally Kenny said, "Not exactly."

Mateo nodded once. "Toward something, then?"

Kenny's gaze drifted across the open range. "Maybe."

That answer seemed to satisfy Mateo more than a prettier one might have.

At the broken fence line, the work began in earnest.

A hard wind from weeks earlier had loosened two posts and collapsed part of the wire into the wash. The ground there was stubborn and sunbaked. Postholes would not be easy. But Kenny dismounted, set to work without theatrics, and by the end of the first hour had proven two useful things: he knew how to handle labor without fuss, and he did not waste effort pretending hard work was easy.

When the shovel struck rock, he did not curse at the heavens.

When the wire bit into his palm, he did not fling it aside like an insulted prince.

When Mateo corrected the angle of a brace, Kenny simply adjusted it and said, "You're right."

That, more than anything, caught the old ranch hand's attention.

Pride was common enough in men.

Teachability was rarer.

By midday, with the fence standing straight again and the north line secure, Mateo passed Kenny the water canteen and said, "You've done this before."

Kenny drank, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and handed it back. "A time or two."

Mateo leaned against the post and studied him.

"You talk like a cowboy," he said, "but not only like a cowboy."

Kenny smiled a little. "That a criticism?"

"It is an observation."

The wind moved softly over the grass and creosote.

"I've done some preaching," Kenny admitted.

Mateo's brows lifted.

"At churches?"

"At churches. At shelters. In rooms where only three people came. In places where nobody much cared whether the sermon was polished so long as it was honest."

Mateo let that settle. "And now?"

Kenny looked out toward the horizon. "Now I'm fixing fence."

"Yes," Mateo said dryly. "I can see that."

The smallest laugh passed between them.

Something eased after that.

They finished the work and rode back at a slower pace in the heat of early afternoon. As Sundance Ranch came into view, Kenny found himself looking at it with something that was not yet affection but might become it. The barn, the porch, the movement of people who belonged to one another by labor and habit, the dust hanging in warm light over the yard—it all stirred some old ache in him, not painfully this time, but like a place inside his spirit remembering a language it had once spoken fluently.

When they rode in, Tommy came trotting up before the horses had fully stopped.

"How'd he do?" the boy asked Mateo, without any effort whatsoever at subtlety.

Mateo dismounted.

"He didn't die."

Tommy blinked. "That all?"

"For a first morning," said Mateo, "it is a respectable beginning."

Tommy beamed as though Kenny himself had been awarded a medal.

The days that followed settled Kenny more deeply into the life of Sundance Ranch.

He helped Eli doctor a skittish gelding with a split pastern and spoke so gently to the horse that even Eli, who admired men mostly by what they could do in silence, glanced at him with new regard.

He repaired a warped tack-room shelf no one had quite gotten around to fixing for months, then apologized for moving the hammer jar before realizing nobody else knew where the nails had gone either.

He found one of the barn kittens tangled behind a feed sack and spent ten patient minutes coaxing the tiny creature loose, only to have it claw straight up his sleeve in gratitude. Tommy laughed so hard he nearly fell over a bucket.

Even Jasper, who had first decided Kenny was probably too quiet to be interesting, began to change his mind after hearing him tell a story at supper about a mule that had once eaten half a sermon outline before a revival meeting in west Texas.

"What happened then?" Tommy asked, enthralled.

"I preached shorter," Kenny said.

"That mule did the congregation a kindness," Jasper declared.

Miss Ginny, seated at the head of the table, lowered her eyes to hide a smile.

It was not just the men who noticed him.

The ranch itself seemed to take his measure and, finding little to object to, slowly opened its gates.

Horses settled under his hands.

Dogs wagged when he passed.

Even the kitchen seemed less guarded around him by week's end, though that may have been because he never entered without wiping his boots and never once acted as though meals appeared by magic.

Once, on the fourth evening, Ginny found him stacking split wood near the back porch long after the others had washed up.

"That wasn't on today's list," she said.

Kenny straightened, a log in his arms.

"No, ma'am."

"Then why are you doing it?"

He set the log down on the pile. "Because tomorrow's weather looks like it may change, and it's easier to carry dry wood now than wet wood later."

Ginny regarded him in the fading light.

"That answer suggests either uncommon wisdom or advancing age."

He smiled. "Could be both."

Something warm brushed the edges of her spirit then, subtle as wind through cottonwoods.

Not romance.

Not yet.

But comfort.

A sense that his presence did not jar the place.

It fit.

On Saturday, a wagon came in from town with feed, nails, flour, lamp oil, and three bundles of mail tied with twine. Such deliveries always stirred the ranch into a different rhythm. Supplies had to be checked. Accounts compared. The driver, Mr. Bellamy, had to be given coffee and tolerated while he shared every rumor within twenty miles as though distributing public service announcements.

Kenny was unloading sacks near the barn when Bellamy, peering over the wagon seat, asked in a voice far too loud to be casual, "Who's your new hand, Miss Ginny?"

Kenny kept working, pretending not to hear.

Ginny signed for the flour barrels. "His name is Kenny."

Bellamy gave a knowing little nod that annoyed everyone within sight except Tommy, who had not yet learned to distrust knowing little nods.

"Looks capable."

"He is."

Bellamy's eyes twinkled in a manner that suggested he considered this to be not merely about labor. "Well now."

Mateo, walking past with a crate on his shoulder, said flatly, "If you spill even one grain of gossip in this yard, I'll make you sweep it."

Bellamy laughed and raised both hands in surrender. “Can’t blame a man for noticing.”

Ginny turned back to the invoice with enough dignity to silence further nonsense. But later that afternoon, as she sat at the front-room desk checking figures, she found herself unexpectedly aware of Kenny’s voice outside the open window.

He was speaking to Tommy near the well, explaining the proper way to coil a rope so it didn’t knot itself into uselessness. His tone was patient, dry in places, amused in others. Tommy, who rarely listened to instruction without wriggling against it, was listening now.

Ginny set down her pencil.

There was something about the way Kenny taught.

He never talked down to the boy. Never showed off what he knew. He simply shared it, steady and kind, as if useful knowledge was meant to be passed on and not hoarded for status.

She looked out the window.

Kenny stood hatless in the afternoon light, sleeves rolled, rope moving sure through his hands. Tommy copied him, got the loop wrong, frowned at it, and tried again. Kenny corrected him without impatience.

The scene was nothing remarkable.

Which was exactly why it touched her.

This, she thought, is how a place is strengthened.

Not only by courage in great moments.

By patience in small ones.

That evening, after supper, Jasper produced a battered harmonica from somewhere mysterious in his room and attempted a tune on the porch that sounded at first like a dying coyote and only gradually improved into music. Eli leaned against the railing and listened. Tommy sat cross-legged on the steps. Mateo pretended not to enjoy it.

Kenny stayed near the porch post, one shoulder resting lightly against it, looking out into the darkening yard.

Ginny came out last, carrying a folded quilt for the chill that would come after sunset. When Jasper finally lowered the harmonica and asked if anyone else knew a song, Tommy pointed at Kenny with all the subtlety of a hunting hound.

“He does. I can tell.”

Kenny looked mildly alarmed. “On what evidence?”

“You look like you know old songs.”

"That is not evidence. That is slander by intuition."

Tommy grinned. "Do you?"

Kenny hesitated, then said, "I know a few."

"Well then," Jasper said, handing over the harmonica, "prove the boy prophetic."

Kenny took it reluctantly, turning it once in his hands as though considering whether to refuse.

Ginny watched him with quiet curiosity.

At last he lifted the instrument and began.

The tune that came out was low and simple at first, shaped more by memory than performance. It was not flashy music. It did not swagger. It carried loneliness in it, and roads, and old camps under wide skies. But there was tenderness there too, and a kind of faithful endurance. The notes rose into the desert evening and seemed to settle over Sundance Ranch like another layer of starlight.

No one spoke while he played.

Even Jasper knew better.

When the last note faded, Tommy let out a breath he had apparently been holding. Eli stared into the yard with a thoughtful expression. Mateo nodded once, very slightly, which from him was nearly applause.

Ginny said nothing for a moment.

Then: "That was beautiful."

Kenny lowered the harmonica. "Thank you."

"Where'd you learn that?"

He looked down at the instrument. "Life, mostly."

There was something in the answer that brushed close to sorrow, but he offered no more, and Ginny did not press. Some stories, she knew, opened like flowers in season. Others had to be entrusted slowly, if at all.

The porch grew quiet again after that.

Tommy eventually yawned himself into bed. Jasper followed, taking the harmonica and half his opinions with him. Eli went to check the barn one last time. Mateo disappeared into the bunkhouse with the solemnity of a man ending a proper day in a proper way.

At last only Ginny and Kenny remained.

The moon had risen pale above the far ridge. Night insects sang faintly in the grass. From the corral came the occasional stamp of a horse.

Ginny drew the quilt more closely around her shoulders and looked out across the silvered yard.

"You play like a man who remembers more than he says."

Kenny gave a faint smile beside her. "Most folks would call that old age again."

"No," she said. "Not old age."

He was quiet a moment.

Then he said, "Maybe memory has its own sound."

She turned that over in her heart.

"Yes," she said softly. "Maybe it does."

Another silence came then, but it was not empty. It felt companionable, like a trail shared without hurry.

At length Ginny asked, "Do you plan to stay long?"

Kenny rested his forearms on the porch rail. "I hadn't planned much beyond the next day when I rode in."

"And now?"

He looked toward the bunkhouse, the barn, the windmill turning slowly in moonlight.

"Now I think I'd like to stay awhile, if the place still has use for me."

Ginny's gaze stayed on the yard, though inwardly something eased.

"Sundance has use for steady men."

He glanced at her. "That all?"

She let the faintest smile touch her mouth. "It also has use for men who stack firewood before the rain."

He bowed his head in mock gravity. "A rare specialization."

She almost laughed.

Almost.

The sound, had it fully come, might have surprised them both.

When at last they parted for the night, Kenny remained on the porch a few minutes longer, watching the moonlight over the ranch. He had come to Sundance as a stranger. That had been less than a week ago. Yet already the place had begun to work on him—not by demanding anything grand, but by offering ordinary goodness so steadily that a tired heart could not help but notice.

Inside the house, Ginny extinguished lamps one by one.

But before drawing the curtain, she looked out once more.

Kenny still stood there beneath the moon, hat in hand now, his hair silvered at the edges by the pale light. He looked not lonely exactly, though solitude hung around him like a familiar coat. He looked like a man standing at the edge of something he had not expected to find.

And for the first time, Ginny allowed herself to wonder—not merely whether he would stay, but what his staying might come to mean.

Not because she was foolish.

Not because she was lonely.

But because the human heart, however disciplined, knows when the air begins to change.

Outside, the cowboy named Kenny lifted his gaze to the stars.

Inside, Miss Ginny turned away from the window.

And somewhere between moonlight and morning, between labor and rest, between what had been lost and what might yet be given, the first quiet threads of something deeper began to gather.

Neither of them spoke of it.

Neither of them would have named it.

But Sundance Ranch, which knew the sound of truth in hoofbeats, hammer blows, prayer, and song, had begun to hear it all the same.

Chapter Four: *Where Love Rode In*

Love did not come to Sundance Ranch all at once.

It did not arrive like a summer storm rolling dark and sudden over the desert. It did not burst through the gate with wild declarations, reckless promises, or the sort of foolishness that fades when the weather turns hard.

No, when love rode into Sundance, it came quietly.

It came in small kindnesses and steady glances. In shared labor. In trust earned one ordinary day at a time. It came the way water comes to thirsty land—not always with thunder, but enough to soften what had long gone dry.

By then Kenny had been at the ranch nearly a month.

Long enough that his horse knew the sound of the supper bell.

Long enough that Tommy had attached himself to him like a burr to a saddle blanket.

Long enough that Eli had stopped referring to him as "the new hand," and Jasper had started telling town people that Kenny worked like a man who had either known discipline in the military or been raised by a very stern grandmother.

Long enough, too, that Miss Ginny no longer looked up in surprise when his boots crossed the porch or his voice sounded in the yard.

He had become part of the rhythm of the place.

And yet there remained, between him and Ginny, a certain carefulness.

Not distance.

Not coldness.

But care.

Both had lived enough life to know that hearts are not toys for the young and careless. Both knew that affection could be real and still ask something costly. Both had seen enough sorrow to understand that tenderness, when it comes later in life, does not come lightly.

So they moved as people do who are both drawn and cautious—never falsely, never foolishly, but with quiet regard.

One morning that regard showed itself in something as simple as rain.

It had begun before dawn, a soft steady rain unusual for that season, tapping on the roof and darkening the yard into fragrant earth and mud. The desert drank it greedily. Creosote scented the air. Water dripped from the porch eaves in silver threads.

Ginny was in the kitchen when Kenny came in from checking the barn, shoulders damp, hat brim wet, boots muddy to the ankle.

"The west pen's holding," he said, removing his hat. "One corner's soft, but it'll stand."

She looked up from the stove. A few drops of rain clung to his hair at the temples. He looked older in the morning light, and kinder somehow, if such a thing were possible.

"You're soaked."

"Not entirely."

"That is a man's way of saying exactly what a woman can plainly see is false."

A slow smile touched his face.

"Could be."

She set a cup of coffee near the stove for him. "Warm yourself before you drip the whole ranch indoors."

"Yes, ma'am."

He stepped closer to the stove and wrapped both hands around the mug. For a moment neither spoke. Rain filled the silence gently.

Then Ginny noticed the scrape across his knuckles—fresh, red, not serious but raw.

"What happened to your hand?"

Kenny glanced down as though it hardly mattered. "Caught it on the gate chain."

She gave him a look.

"That means you tore it open doing something for this ranch before breakfast."

He seemed about to dismiss it again, but something in her expression made him think better of it.

"It's nothing."

"That," she said, reaching for the small tin of salve she kept on the shelf, "is another thing men say when they expect women to admire unnecessary bleeding."

He laughed under his breath.

"Sit."

He obeyed.

There was no great drama in what followed. She cleaned the scrape, applied the salve, and wrapped it with practiced fingers. Kenny sat still beneath her touch, his large hand resting in hers, both of them quieter than the simple task required. Outside, the rain went on falling.

Ginny was aware of his hand in a way that startled her.

Not because she had never tended an injury before. She had done so countless times.

But because this time it was Kenny.

Because something in the room had changed.

When she finished, she let go gently and said, without looking directly at him, "Try not to wrestle the ranch all by yourself before sunrise."

"I'll make a note of it."

"You do that."

But his voice had softened, and hers had too.

It was a little thing.

Still, all that day the memory of his hand in hers stayed with her.

And Kenny, for his part, found that the bandage on his knuckles seemed less noticeable than the warmth her care had left behind.

Love rode in that way.

Quietly.

Another evening it arrived in laughter.

The day had been long and clear after the rain, and the whole ranch smelled faintly of damp earth and cut hay. Supper was over. The stars were beginning to appear. Tommy and Jasper had somehow gotten into an argument about whether a mule was smarter than a horse or simply more insulting. Eli said nothing, which meant he was listening with deep enjoyment. Mateo sat near the porch rail cleaning his pipe as though all human foolishness had long ago ceased to surprise him.

Ginny was shelling peas into a bowl. Kenny sat nearby repairing a leather strap.

Tommy, eager to prove some point known only to himself, attempted to imitate the expression of a particularly mean mule he claimed to have known as a child. The result was so ridiculous—eyes crossed, upper lip shoved out, posture bent into tragic ugliness—that Jasper exploded with laughter so suddenly he nearly fell backward off the porch bench.

The sound of it startled a laugh right out of Ginny before she had time to stop it.

Not a polite smile.

Not a little chuckle behind her hand.

A true laugh.

Warm, bright, unguarded.

Everyone turned.

Ginny herself looked momentarily surprised, as though the sound had escaped from some younger self she had not seen in years.

Kenny looked at her then—and kept looking.

There was moonlight just beginning at the edge of the yard and lantern light glowing from behind her, and in that mingled light her laughter made her seem not less strong, but more alive. The reserve she so often wore had slipped, and what shone through was joy.

It struck him clean through.

Tommy, delighted by his own success, performed the mule face again. This only made Ginny laugh harder, and soon even Mateo's stern mouth gave way at one corner.

But Kenny had grown quiet.

Not because he was sad.

Because something tender had taken hold of him so suddenly that he could do nothing but feel it.

Later, when the others had gone in, Ginny lingered on the porch, still smiling faintly at the memory.

"I had forgotten," she said.

Kenny, beside her, glanced over. "Forgotten what?"

"What it feels like to laugh without thinking first."

He leaned his shoulder against the post. "You ought to do it more often."

She gave him a sidelong look. "And whose fault is it that I don't?"

"Likely Jasper's, in one way or another."

That made her smile again.

The yard lay quiet beneath the stars. The cool after-rain air held the scent of wet dust and mesquite.

Then Kenny said, very gently, "You're beautiful when you laugh."

The words were plain.

No ornament. No trick.

And because they were so plainly spoken, they landed all the deeper.

Ginny grew still.

A younger woman might have blushed and looked away. A careless woman might have answered flirtation with flirtation. But Ginny was neither young nor careless, and she knew the difference between a line and a truth.

She met his gaze.

"Careful, cowboy."

"About speaking honestly?"

"About making a woman remember she is still a woman."

The silence after that was tender, and a little dangerous.

Kenny did not move closer.

But something drew near all the same.

There were other moments.

A ride together to the south pasture when a storm threatened and the sky darkened green-gray above the mountains. They worked side by side driving a loose group of cattle toward shelter, and afterward, with thunder rolling off in the distance, they paused on horseback atop the ridge. The wind tugged at their coats. The world stretched wild and open below.

Ginny looked out across the land she loved.

Kenny looked at her.

Not openly enough to startle her, but not so discreetly that she could not feel it.

"What?" she asked, eyes still on the horizon.

He answered after a beat. "Just thinking the ranch suits you."

"It had better. I've given it enough years."

"It's not only that."

This time she turned.

He sat his horse with the storm-light behind him, hat shadowing his face, yet there was no mistaking the seriousness there.

"You belong to this place," he said. "And it belongs to you. Some things fit so true a man can see it from a mile off."

Her heart moved strangely in her chest.

Not with girlish fluttering.

With recognition.

To be seen rightly is no small gift.

Especially after years of being seen only for what one does, what one endures, what one manages to keep from falling apart.

She looked back out over Sundance then, because it was easier than staying under that gaze. But inwardly, something in her had been touched that did not easily return unchanged.

And once, on a Sunday afternoon, after the chores were lighter and the house quieter, Kenny found her alone under the cottonwoods by the wash, reading from her Bible.

He had gone there only to walk.

She looked up as he approached. "You may sit if you know how to be peaceable."

"I can manage that in good company."

He sat on the fallen log beside her, not too close.

For a while they spoke of scripture. Then of faith. Then, as such talks sometimes do between two souls who know reverence and sorrow both, the conversation turned toward life itself.

Not every detail. Not every wound.

But enough.

Enough for him to tell her that he had loved and lost, and that grief changes a man even when grace keeps him from hardening.

Enough for her to tell him that endurance can become such a habit that a woman forgets she is allowed to lean on anyone.

Enough for both of them to understand that neither was simply lonely and reaching.

What stood between them was not hunger for comfort alone.

It was esteem. Trust. A gentleness born of having known pain and still choosing kindness.

When the shadows lengthened and the sun began to slope westward, Kenny said quietly, "There are some people the Lord sends into a life like rain after drought."

Ginny closed her Bible and held it in both hands.

"That sounds like a dangerous thought."

"Some truths are."

She did not answer right away.

At length she said, "And some are holy."

Their eyes met then, and the whole afternoon seemed to gather itself around that moment.

No one touched.

No promise was made.

Yet both knew the border they had been approaching was very near.

Love rode in one final step at sundown a week later.

The day had ended hot, but evening came mild. The whole ranch glowed under the last golden wash of sunlight. Supper was done. The others had drifted toward the bunkhouse or the barn. A hush lay over Sundance, as if even the wind knew something was drawing near.

Ginny stood by the corral, one hand resting on the top rail, watching Rosie nose through fresh hay.

She heard Kenny's footsteps behind her before he spoke.

"Mind if I stand here?"

"It's still a free country."

He came to the rail beside her.

For a while they said nothing. The horses shifted softly. A dove called from somewhere near the wash. Red Mountain burned in the distance with that deep evening color the desert keeps for itself.

Then Kenny said, "I've been trying to decide whether I ought to say something."

"That usually means you already know you will."

He gave a quiet breath of laughter. "Yes."

She waited.

When he spoke again, there was no performance in him. Only honesty, steady and unhidden.

"I came here meaning to stay no longer than a day or two. Maybe a week if the work held." He kept his eyes on the pasture beyond the corral. "But somewhere between your coffee, Tommy's questions, Mateo's silences, and the way this place feels at dusk, I stopped wanting to leave."

Ginny's fingers tightened very slightly on the rail.

He continued.

"And somewhere in there, Miss Ginny, I began caring for you in a way a man ought not speak lightly about."

Now she turned toward him fully.

He did not look away.

"There's no foolishness in it," he said. "I'm too old for foolishness and too honest to pretend this is nothing. I respect you too much to make a game of your heart. But I would be lying if I acted as though you had not come to mean something to me. More than something."

The world seemed very still.

Ginny felt the force of his words not as flattery, but as truth knocking quietly and waiting to be let in.

She had imagined this moment in some hidden chamber of her heart and told herself not to. She had noticed every small kindness, every steady look, every deepening tenderness, and warned herself not to build a future out of careful gestures.

And yet here it was.

Not imagined.

Real.

"Kenny," she said softly, and his name in her voice was almost an answer by itself.

He waited.

She looked down once, then back up, her face lit by sunset and by something more vulnerable than he had ever seen in her.

"I have stood alone a long time," she said. "Not because I always wanted to. Because life required it."

"I know."

"And I have no patience left for shallow things."

"Neither do I."

She searched his face, as if weighing not only the words but the man who spoke them.

Then she said, "You have come to mean something to me too."

The breath left him slowly.

Not with triumph.

With gratitude so deep it nearly hurt.

He did not reach for her immediately. That restraint itself was part of why she trusted him.

Instead he asked, low and careful, "May I court you properly, Miss Ginny?"

Something tender and amused flickered through her eyes.

"Properly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You mean with respect and patience and no grand nonsense?"

"That is exactly what I mean."

At last her smile came—soft, radiant, and full of all she had not said aloud.

"Yes," she answered. "You may."

That was all.

No kiss beneath the sunset.
No violins from the heavens.
No wild declarations to shame common sense.

Only a yes.

Only two people, no longer young, no longer foolish, standing by a corral in the evening light and choosing not fantasy, but something steadier.

Something worthy.

The horses went on eating.

The wind moved through the grass.

And there, with the sun lowering over Sundance Ranch, love rode in at last—not loud, not reckless, but faithful and true.

Later that night, when Ginny stood at her window before drawing the curtain, she looked out across the moonlit yard and felt the ranch differently than she had before.

It was still hers.
Still work.
Still responsibility.
Still weather and cattle and bills and chores and prayers.

But now, woven quietly into all of it, was hope.

Not the fragile sort.

The kind built to last.

And Kenny, lying awake in the bunkhouse while Jasper snored hard enough to challenge the rafters, looked up into the dark and gave thanks in the silence of his heart.

Not for romance alone.

For mercy.

For timing.

For the strange grace of arriving somewhere worn and road-weary, only to find not merely work, but welcome.

Not merely shelter.

But love.

Sundance Ranch slept under the stars.

And the story, having crossed one threshold, was ready now for the deeper trail ahead.

Chapter Five: *Courtin' at Sundance Ranch*

Once wordless understanding had been spoken aloud between them, life at Sundance Ranch did not suddenly turn into a storybook.

The sun still rose early.
The horses still needed feed.
Fences still broke.
Bills still came.
Dust still found its way into everything from boots to biscuit dough.

And yet, for all that remained the same, something had changed.

Not only in Kenny and Ginny, but in the air around them.

It showed itself first in little things.

Tommy noticed that Miss Ginny no longer used quite the same voice when she said Kenny's name. He could not have explained the difference, only that it sounded softer around the edges, as if the syllables had found a place to rest. Jasper noticed that Kenny had taken to washing up a little more thoroughly before supper and declared this proof that romance had made a personal enemy of grime. Eli noticed everything and commented on nothing. Mateo noticed and, having long ago accepted that the Lord did not consult him before arranging people's lives, went on with his work.

Miss Ginny and Kenny themselves behaved with no foolishness.

They did not moon about the yard neglecting chores. They did not stand sighing in doorways like lovestruck children from a traveling stage show. If anything, they were more careful than before. Courting, in their minds, was not license for silliness. It was a promise to move forward with respect.

Still, a ranch is close quarters for secrets, and Sundance Ranch had no secrets for long.

The first open sign came three mornings after Kenny had asked permission to court her.

Breakfast had just ended. Chairs scraped back. Coffee cups stood half empty. Mateo and Eli had already gone out. Jasper was still reaching for one last biscuit despite having eaten enough for two honest men and one small bear. Tommy was pretending to help clear while actually hoping to hear interesting adult conversation.

Ginny stood at the stove tying on her gloves.

"Kenny," she said, "I'll be riding south to check the lower pasture after dinner."

He looked up from the harness strap he was inspecting. "Would you like company?"

There was a pause in the room.

Not because the question was improper.

Because it was plain.

Ginny met his eyes calmly. "Yes. I would."

Tommy nearly dropped a plate.

Jasper's expression lit up with the delight of a man witnessing the first sparks of a campfire he fully intended to warm himself by. Eli lowered his head to hide a smile. Mateo, who had already reached the door, merely muttered, "About time," and stepped outside before anyone could accuse him of sentiment.

Ginny turned to Tommy. "If that plate breaks, you'll eat supper from a feed pan."

Tommy straightened at once. "Yes'm."

Kenny's mouth twitched, but he wisely said nothing.

That afternoon they rode together beneath a wide blue sky brushed with high white clouds. The land south of Sundance opened in long shallow swells scattered with mesquite and rabbitbrush, the grass touched here and there by fading gold. Their horses moved at an easy pace, no hurry in them, and the ranch stretched behind like something steady and good.

They spoke first of practical things—the water level in the far trough, a weak section of fence line, whether the sorrel mare would foal early.

Then, once the work was done and the trail turned homeward, the conversation softened.

Ginny asked, "Were you always called Kenny?"

"Most of my life."

"Most?"

He tipped his hat back slightly. "When I was a boy, my mother called me Kenneth if I was in trouble, Kenny if I wasn't, and son if she was praying."

That made her smile.

"And which one were you most often?"

He thought about it. "Probably whichever one meant I needed correcting."

"That seems honest."

"I'm trying to make a habit of it."

She glanced over at him. "Keep at it."

For a while they rode in companionable silence. A hawk wheeled high overhead. Somewhere unseen, quail stirred in the brush.

Then Kenny said, "Did anyone ever court you properly before?"

The question was careful, not prying.

Ginny looked ahead over her horse's ears. "Once or twice, in younger years. Though some men mistake persistence for character."

"And did they suit you?"

"No."

He nodded slowly. "I'm glad."

She turned to him with one brow raised. "That is a bold thing to say."

"It is an honest one."

The light breeze moved a loose strand of hair near her cheek. She reached up and tucked it back beneath her hat.

"I have not been courted in a very long time," she said.

His voice gentled. "Then I count it an honor."

No grand speech could have touched her more deeply.

When they returned to the ranch, Tommy was waiting near the gate under the guise of importance.

"How was the south pasture?" he asked, much too casually.

"Still south," said Ginny.

Tommy frowned. "That ain't much of a report."

"It is," Kenny said, dismounting, "if you value accuracy."

Jasper, passing with a grain sack over one shoulder, grinned openly. "You two gonna need the rest of us to clear off the porch after supper or just pretend not to watch?"

Ginny gave him a look sharp enough to pare bark from a cedar.

"Jasper."

He lifted a hand. "I'm silent. See? Silent as a grave."

Mateo, overhearing, said, "You have never been silent as anything."

The evenings took on a sweeter rhythm after that.

Not extravagant. Not indulgent.

Simply sweet.

Sometimes after supper, if the work was done and the weather kind, Kenny and Ginny would walk the yard together. They might stop by the corral to watch the horses settle or stand near the barn while the last of the western light drained from the sky. Their conversations moved between ordinary matters and deeper ones with the ease of people who respected both.

He asked her once what first made her stay at Sundance.

She rested her hands on the corral rail and looked toward the open pasture.

"The land needed somebody to believe it could be more than it was," she said. "And perhaps so did I."

He stood beside her in the fading light, quiet a moment.

"That sounds like a thing the Lord does often."

"Yes," she said softly. "It does."

On another evening he brought her a small object he had found while clearing stones near the north line—a smooth bit of pale desert quartz, no larger than a robin's egg, with a glint in it when the sun struck right.

"I thought you might like it," he said.

She took it from his palm and turned it in the light.

"It's only a stone."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But you brought it to me."

"I did."

She looked up, and there was such warmth in her face that he felt suddenly shy, which was not a sensation he had expected to know again at his age.

"Then I shall keep it," she said.

Tommy saw the stone on her windowsill the next morning and nearly burst from curiosity.

"What's that for?"

Ginny did not look up from the biscuit dough. "It is a rock."

Tommy scowled. "I can see that. But why is it in the house?"

"Because," she said calmly, "it was given to me."

Tommy opened his mouth, understood at once, and grinned so hard he had to leave the kitchen before he embarrassed himself beyond recovery.

As the days passed, courtship became not a spectacle but a pattern.

Kenny made her laugh more often.

Ginny trusted him with more of the ranch's concerns.

They worked side by side easily now, each aware of the other in ways both comforting and newly tender.

One Saturday evening, Sundance Ranch hosted a small gathering of neighbors for coffee, pie, and talk after a branding earlier in the day. Such things were common in ranch country—half labor, half fellowship, and wholly observed by those with an eye for human developments.

By sunset the porch and yard held a handful of local families, two widowers who never missed pie if they could help it, Mrs. Bellamy from town in a hat decorated with entirely too many artificial cherries, and Reverend Pike, who spoke slowly enough to make a man appreciate old age without desiring it.

Kenny helped set chairs. Ginny carried out coffee pots and plates. Everything might have gone unnoticed had Mrs. Bellamy not possessed the social instincts of a hunting dog.

She accepted her coffee, looked from Ginny to Kenny and back again, and smiled in a way that suggested she had just confirmed something she intended to enjoy privately and discuss publicly.

"Well," she said, "this feels nice."

Ginny, who had survived harder trials than Mrs. Bellamy's tone, answered smoothly, "Coffee usually does."

Mrs. Bellamy patted her hand. "Of course."

But later, while neighbors talked and the last light softened over the yard, Kenny found himself standing beside Ginny near the porch steps as they listened to some story Reverend Pike had begun and not yet found the mercy to end. Mrs. Bellamy glanced over, saw them shoulder to shoulder, and beamed as though the evening itself had been arranged solely for her satisfaction.

Kenny murmured, "I believe we've become a topic."

Ginny kept her eyes straight ahead. "Then let us try to be a dull one."

He nearly laughed aloud.

But what touched her more than the teasing was what came later.

As the gathering broke up and lanterns were lit, old Mrs. Alvarez from the next spread over took Ginny gently aside. She was a woman who had buried a husband, raised sons, outlasted hardship, and earned the right to speak directly.

When the others had moved a few paces away, she said in a low voice, "That one looks at you like a man thanking God."

Ginny was not prepared for how deeply that simple observation would land.

Mrs. Alvarez squeezed her hand once. "It is a good thing, mija. Do not be afraid of a good thing."

Then she was gone, calling for her shawl and her grandson in the same breath.

Later that night, after the yard had been cleared and the last cup washed, Ginny sat alone a moment at the kitchen table. The house was quiet. Wind brushed the screen door lightly. Lamplight pooled over the wood grain.

A good thing.

The words lingered.

For so many years she had measured life by what needed enduring, repairing, carrying, or overcoming. Joy had come, yes, but often as a visitor. Responsibility was what stayed. Steadiness was what stayed. Duty was what stayed.

And now this.

Not an interruption to her life.

A good thing within it.

Outside, Kenny was securing the latch on the tack-room door when she stepped onto the porch.

He looked up at once.

"You're still at it?" she asked.

"Just finishing."

She came down the steps and stood in the moonwashed yard. "You work too late."

"So do you."

"That is different."

"Because you say so?"

"Yes."

He smiled.

The moon had risen pale and broad above the ridge, casting soft silver over the corral rails and barn roof. The ranch lay hushed around them, every chore complete, every creature settled.

Ginny said, "Mrs. Alvarez spoke to me tonight."

Kenny leaned one elbow on the fence post. “Should I be worried?”

“Not unless you’ve been stealing pie.”

“I took only one slice.”

“She knows that too, likely.”

He shook his head. “Formidable woman.”

“Yes.”

There was a pause.

Then Ginny said, more quietly, “She told me not to be afraid of a good thing.”

He looked at her then with full attention.

“And are you?”

She considered before answering. “Not afraid, exactly.” She folded her hands lightly before her. “Just aware.”

“Of what?”

“That love, when it comes later in life, is not weightless. It asks room to be made for it. It changes the shape of things.”

Kenny’s answer came slow and true. “The best things usually do.”

Her eyes lifted to his.

He stepped no closer than courtesy allowed, yet his presence felt near enough to warm the air.

“I would never ask you to become less yourself,” he said. “Not for me.”

The sincerity in his voice made her throat tighten unexpectedly.

“And I would never want a man I cared for to become less himself either,” she said.

He nodded once. “Then perhaps that’s not what love is asking of us.”

No one had ever spoken to her quite that way.

Not trying to possess.
Not trying to impress.
Only to understand.

The moonlight softened everything except truth.

She smiled then, slow and deep, and he saw that the smile was for him.

For a while they simply stood there in the quiet of Sundance Ranch, letting the moment be enough.

At last Kenny said, "Would it be improper if I said I've looked forward to each day more since I started courting you?"

"Only if you say it too often."

He considered. "How often is too often?"

She gave him a look that might have been teasing if it weren't so gentle. "You are learning dangerous ground, cowboy."

"I've ridden worse."

That did it.

She laughed softly, and the sound moved through him like sunrise.

From the bunkhouse porch came Jasper's voice, carrying through the night far too clearly.

"If you two are done speakin' poetry at the moon, some of us are trying to sleep!"

Mateo's voice followed immediately: "No one is speaking poetry. And no one believes you are asleep."

Ginny closed her eyes briefly in resigned amusement. Kenny rubbed a hand over his mouth to hide a grin.

"Well," she said, "there goes the dignity of the moment."

"Jasper is gifted that way."

She turned toward the house, then paused and looked back.

"Goodnight, Kenny."

His voice was low and warm. "Goodnight, Miss Ginny."

She took two steps, then turned again.

"And Kenny?"

"Yes?"

"You may say it again."

He knew at once what she meant.

That he had looked forward to each day more.

Something lit in his face—not boyish, but deeply glad.

"I will," he said.

She went inside then, leaving him in the silvered yard with the moon overhead and gratitude filling his chest so fully it was nearly prayer.

Courtin' at Sundance Ranch went on that way—not with loud passion, but with deepening devotion. It lived in shared glances across the breakfast table, in rides taken together, in small offerings, in honest words, in the growing certainty that what had begun between them was not passing through.

It was taking root.

And roots, in that hard and holy land, meant everything.

Chapter Six: *Under the Desert Moon*

The desert changed after dark.

By day it was honest in its hardness—sun-struck, wind-shaped, all sharp edges and open distances. But at night it softened into something older and more mysterious. Moonlight silvered the corrals and laid a pale blessing over the pasture. The rough boards of fences turned gentle beneath its touch. The distant mountains seemed less like barriers and more like ancient watchers standing guard at the rim of the world.

And over Sundance Ranch, the moon rose full and clear.

It was three weeks into their courtship when the night came that both of them would remember long after other details had blurred into time.

The day itself had been ordinary enough, filled with the useful work that made up ranch life. A wagon axle had needed greasing. One of the mares had tested Tommy's patience and won. Jasper had spent half an hour insisting he knew the exact location of a missing hammer only to discover it tucked in his own belt. Supper had been hearty. The weather fair. Nothing about the daylight hours suggested that the evening would mark any turning at all.

But often the most meaningful moments begin inside ordinary days.

After supper, the others drifted into their usual places. Eli went to check the barn one final time. Mateo sat with his pipe and said little, as was his custom and gift. Jasper, having exhausted everyone with a story that improved itself with every retelling, finally surrendered to sleep. Tommy had been sent to bed after asking Kenny whether courting meant a person was halfway to marriage or only halfway to getting themselves into trouble.

Now the ranch lay quiet.

Ginny stepped out onto the porch with her shawl around her shoulders and paused beneath the moonlight. The air had cooled just enough to make the night pleasant. A faint breeze moved through the cottonwoods near the wash, and from the corral came the soft shifting sounds of horses settling. Above, the sky stretched wide and black-blue, crowded with stars so bright they seemed close enough to gather in open hands.

Kenny was already there by the porch rail.

He turned as she came out, and though he said nothing at first, something in his face made her feel as though he had been waiting not merely for company, but for her.

"That is a mighty serious expression for such a peaceful night," she said.

He glanced up at the sky. "I was trying to decide whether the Lord made the desert more beautiful by moonlight so folks wouldn't give up on it in the daytime."

Ginny smiled faintly. "And what did you decide?"

"That He made it beautiful in both. But a body notices it better at night."

"That sounds like theology from a tired cowboy."

"That is exactly what it is."

She came to stand beside him at the rail.

For a while they simply looked out across Sundance Ranch. The barn roof glimmered pale. The windmill turned slow and quiet. The open pasture beyond looked almost like water beneath the moon, shifting softly in silver light. Everything familiar seemed touched with wonder.

"It feels different at night," Kenny said after a while.

"The ranch?"

"You."

She turned her head slightly toward him. "That is a bold answer."

"It is an honest one."

The moonlight softened the lines of his face, though it could not erase the life that had marked him. She could see kindness there. Weariness too, still. But now it seemed joined by something steadier—peace, perhaps, or the first sure signs of it.

"In what way?" she asked.

He thought a moment before answering.

"In daylight, you belong to everything here. The horses, the work, the people, the decisions, the weight of the place. At night…" He glanced at her. "At night you seem more your own."

The words settled deeply.

Ginny looked out over the yard again, but she was no longer seeing the rails or barn. She was considering what it meant to be seen that way.

"It has been a long while," she said quietly, "since anyone looked at me as though I were more than what I carry."

Kenny's voice gentled. "You have always been more than that."

Her hand tightened slightly around the edge of the shawl.

There are words a person hears politely and words that go straight to the hidden chambers of the heart. This was the second kind.

She did not answer immediately. Instead she stepped down from the porch and into the yard, letting the moonlight receive her. After a beat, Kenny followed.

They walked slowly toward the corral, not close enough to touch, but close enough to feel the nearness between them. The ground gave off the faint, dry scent of dust and evening. Somewhere in the distance a night bird called once and fell silent.

At the corral rail, Rosie lifted her head, recognized them, and returned to her hay with quiet approval.

Ginny rested her folded arms atop the rail. "When I was younger," she said, "I used to think love would be something large and unmistakable. Like a thunderstorm rolling over the prairie. Like a church bell no one could ignore."

Kenny leaned beside her. "And now?"

She smiled a little, though there was wistfulness in it. "Now I think it comes more often like this."

He waited.

"Steady. Quiet. And all the more real because it does not have to shout."

Kenny looked at her then, and there was such warmth in his gaze that she felt it before he ever spoke.

"I'm grateful for that," he said.

"For which part?"

"For quiet love." He paused. "And for real love."

The stillness that followed was different from silence. It was full of meaning, like a held breath neither of them wanted to disturb too soon.

Then Kenny said, "May I tell you something?"

"You may."

"The night I first rode into Sundance, I stopped up on that western rise before coming down." He nodded toward the ridge beyond the dark pasture. "I saw the ranch from there—the barn, the windmill, the smoke from the chimney. And I thought to myself, that place was built by love."

Ginny turned fully toward him now.

He went on, his voice low and unhurried. "Not soft love. Not lazy love. The kind that works and mends and stays. The kind that buries sorrow and keeps tending what's alive. I did not know then that you were the heart of it. But I knew I was looking at something holy."

No one had ever spoken of Sundance Ranch that way to her.

People had praised the place, yes. Admired its order, its strength, its endurance. But this—this understanding that love itself had shaped the ranch—felt like being known not only in her labor, but in the spirit that had sustained it.

She looked down briefly, overwhelmed in that quiet, private way that does not seek witness.

"You say dangerous things under moonlight," she said softly.

He smiled. "Then perhaps we ought to avoid the porch after dark."

"That seems unlikely."

"Yes, ma'am."

She laughed under her breath, then grew still again.

"Kenny," she said after a moment, "do you ever fear it?"

"Fear what?"

"This." She did not gesture between them; she did not need to. "Caring deeply for someone after life has already taught you what it can take away."

The question was so honest that he answered it with equal honesty.

"Yes," he said.

She looked up.

"Yes," he repeated, "I fear it. Not because I doubt you. Not because I doubt what's growing between us. I fear it because love always means vulnerability, and no amount of age or faith keeps a person from knowing the risk of loss." He rested his hands on the top rail. "But I would rather risk loving you than spend the rest of my years pretending safety is enough."

The words went through her like truth always does—cleanly, deeply.

For a few seconds the desert, the stars, the ranch, all of it seemed to fall back from the edge of that moment.

Ginny's voice, when it came, was barely above the night wind.

"I think I know what you mean."

He waited, giving her the dignity of her own pace.

She looked out at the moonlit pasture and spoke as if the darkness itself could be trusted with the tenderness of it.

"For a long time I have thanked God for strength. For endurance. For the ability to carry what was mine to carry." She drew a slow breath. "But lately I have found myself thanking Him for something else."

Kenny did not move. "What is that?"

"For gentleness."

When she turned back to him, her eyes shone in the pale light.

"For the gentleness you have brought into this place," she said. "Into my life."

He looked as though he had been entrusted with something precious and would sooner bleed than mishandle it.

"That means more to me than I can rightly say."

"I believe that."

Neither of them reached for the other yet.

That was not because they did not want to.

It was because this moment deserved the full reverence of being seen, spoken, and understood before it was touched.

At length Kenny said, "There is one more thing I've been wanting to ask, though I've tried to be patient."

She arched one eyebrow. "Tried?"

"Tried."

"Well then. Ask."

His expression softened further, if that was possible.

"When you think of the future now, Miss Ginny…" He hesitated only long enough to show her that the question mattered deeply. "Is there room in it where I stand?"

Her answer came slowly, not from uncertainty but from care.

"Yes," she said. "There is."

He breathed out as though he had been holding more than air.

"More room than there was before," she added.

That earned from him a smile so full of gratitude it nearly undid her.

The moon had climbed higher. Its light lay white across the yard and caught in the loose strands of hair at her temple. Kenny looked at her as if he knew he ought to keep still and could not quite manage it forever.

"Ginny," he said quietly.

It was the first time he had spoken her name without the formality of title.

Not disrespectfully.

Tenderly.

She felt it all the way through.

"Kenny," she answered, and his name in her voice held exactly the same.

That seemed to open some gentle gate between them.

He lifted one hand, slowly enough that she could stop him if she wished. She did not. His fingers touched hers where they rested on the rail—just that, no more at first. A careful meeting of hands beneath the desert moon.

Her hand turned under his.

No glove. No barrier. Warmth answering warmth.

They stood that way for a long moment, hand in hand, while moonlight washed the corral silver and the horses breathed softly nearby. It was not a dramatic gesture. It was not meant for anyone's eyes but their own and the Lord's above them.

Yet to both of them it felt enormous.

After a while, Kenny said, almost with wonder, "I had forgotten how much peace there can be in simply holding a hand you care about."

Ginny's fingers closed a little more around his.

"So had I."

He looked down at their joined hands, then back at her face. The tenderness there was so plain, so unguarded, that she knew neither of them could return from this night unchanged.

Still, it was she who gave the next small permission.

She stepped half a pace nearer.

Nothing reckless.
Nothing hurried.

Just nearer.

Kenny's free hand rose, hesitated at her shoulder, then settled there lightly, as if even now he was asking without words whether he might. She did not draw back.

The world seemed to narrow to silver light, shared breath, and the nearness of someone dearly trusted.

When he bent toward her, it was with such care that the gesture itself felt like a prayer.

Their first kiss was not the kind young people in novels give one another—breathless, thoughtless, aflame with impatience.

It was gentler than that.

Reverent.

A kiss shaped by gratitude, respect, and the long roads both had traveled to arrive at such a moment at all.

When they parted, neither spoke right away.

Ginny kept one hand against his arm, steadying herself not from weakness but from the quiet force of feeling. Kenny looked at her as if the moon had just altered its course and he was not entirely certain the world was still the same.

"Well," she said softly, after a moment.

"Well," he echoed.

That made her smile, and then, to his delight, laugh under her breath.

"I believe," she said, "that was worth the waiting."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, voice warm and rough all at once. "It surely was."

They did not kiss again that night.

One was enough.

Enough to mark the moment.
Enough to sanctify the tenderness between them.
Enough to let them both walk back toward the house carrying something new and precious in the heart.

At the porch steps, Ginny turned toward him. The moonlight fell across her face, leaving half in silver and half in shadow.

"Goodnight, Kenny."

"Goodnight, Ginny."

He did not add Miss.
She did not ask him to.

Inside, she paused by the front window before extinguishing the lamp. Outside, he stood for a while in the yard, hat in hand, looking up at the same moon that had witnessed their first kiss. Neither felt young exactly. Neither felt foolish.

They felt blessed.

And across Sundance Ranch, the desert kept its silence.

The wind moved softly through the dark.
The horses slept.
The stars held their places.

And under the desert moon, love had deepened into something neither storm nor sorrow could easily uproot.

Chapter Seven: *A Sunday at St. Luke's*

Sunday came to Sundance Ranch with a different kind of stillness.

The work did not disappear, of course. Horses still needed feeding before church clothes were brushed off and boots wiped down. A ranch did not stop being a ranch because it was the Lord's Day. Yet even the chores seemed to carry a quieter rhythm that morning, as though the whole place understood it was being asked to breathe differently.

The sun rose soft over the Florida Mountains, spreading gold across the pasture and catching the dew that the night had spared upon the grass nearest the wash. The air was cool and clean, washed clear by the week's shifting weather. From the kitchen came the smell of coffee and biscuits, though breakfast was simpler than on workdays. Even Jasper seemed willing to accept fewer potatoes when reminded that church pews had been known to groan under men who ate like harvest hands before a sermon.

Miss Ginny was ready early.

She stood at the mirror in her room fastening the final button of a dark blue dress she wore only on Sundays and special occasions. It was modest, well kept, and suited her in the way some things do when they have become part of a person's history. A small silver cross rested at her throat. Her hat, set on the bed behind her, was not the same one she wore to ride fence or inspect the corrals, but a better one, trimmed simply and tastefully. There was nothing vain in her appearance. She dressed for church with the dignity of a woman who believed worship deserved her best.

Yet this morning she found herself lingering a moment longer than usual before the mirror.

Not because she doubted how she looked.

Because she knew Kenny would see her.

The thought touched her with a warmth both new and tender. She had dressed for church for many years with reverence, habit, and self-respect. This was the first time in a long while that she had also dressed with the quiet awareness that one particular man's eyes might rest kindly upon her.

In the bunkhouse, the men were preparing in their own way, which meant with varying degrees of success.

Eli was already clean and buttoned, his hair combed back, boots polished enough to reflect light if not character. Mateo, who had likely been born with the ability to look orderly without trying, sat on the edge of his bunk lacing his Sunday boots with calm efficiency. Tommy was wrestling with a collar that seemed to have developed a personal hatred of him. Jasper, after declaring that a necktie was a tool of oppression invented by bitter preachers, had finally allowed Kenny to help him knot it.

"You're pullin' too tight," Jasper complained.

"That's because you keep talking," Kenny said.

"I can talk and breathe at the same time."

"Not if I'm doing this right."

Tommy snorted. Mateo closed his eyes as though praying for the strength to endure fellowship.

Kenny, however, had taken unusual care that morning.

His shirt was freshly washed and pressed as well as life on a ranch allowed. His boots had been cleaned before sunrise. He had shaved more carefully than usual, though not so closely that the weathered character of his face was lost. He wore his good hat, and beneath his steady outward manner there was something almost boyish in the attention he gave to the details.

Tommy, whose powers of observation were stronger than his powers of discretion, noticed at once.

"You're polishing your belt buckle."

Kenny glanced down as if surprised to be caught. "It was dusty."

Tommy grinned. "Uh-huh."

Mateo murmured, "The boy may survive to adulthood after all."

When Kenny stepped out into the yard a few minutes later, he saw Miss Ginny on the porch.

For a moment, the whole morning paused.

She was standing near the top step, gloves in hand, sunlight touching the brim of her hat and the line of her shoulders. The blue dress made her eyes seem darker, steadier, and somehow softer too. She looked exactly as she always had in one sense—composed, self-possessed, quietly beautiful—and yet because he now loved her, everything about her struck him differently. Not merely as pleasing. As precious.

Ginny saw him stop.

"You look very respectable," she said.

Kenny removed his hat briefly. "I was aiming for barely acceptable."

"That may have been too ambitious for Jasper."

From somewhere behind him came Jasper's voice. "I heard that."

Kenny smiled and took the porch steps slowly. "You look…" He paused, not because he lacked words, but because he wanted the right one. "You look lovely."

Ginny lowered her eyes for the briefest moment, and that alone told him how much the compliment had meant.

"Thank you," she said. "You clean up well yourself."

Tommy appeared then, collar finally in order but hair slightly rebellious. He looked from one to the other and groaned with dramatic suffering.

"If you two start acting sweet before church, I'm riding in the wagon."

Mateo, passing by, said, "Then you will be walking."

The trip to St. Luke's took them into town by wagon and horseback, as was often the case depending on who needed to carry what and how many wished to ride. Ginny drove the wagon that morning, with Tommy beside her and a basket of food in the back for the fellowship table. Mateo and Eli rode ahead. Jasper alternated between walking and climbing onto the rear step whenever he thought nobody was noticing. Kenny rode near the side of the wagon, not so close as to crowd the horse, but close enough that conversation could drift between him and Ginny in the easy intervals of the road.

The desert stretched open around them, glowing beneath the climbing sun. Dust rose lightly beneath the wheels. The road into town was rutted in places, bordered by sagebrush and low thorn, with the church steeple appearing slowly in the distance like a promise keeping its place against the sky.

"Did you grow up in church?" Ginny asked him after a while.

Kenny rested one hand on the saddle horn. "Mostly. Enough to know the hymns before I understood the words."

"And later?"

"Later I learned the words the hard way."

She looked at him with quiet understanding. "That is how most of us do."

Tommy, who was trying not to eavesdrop and failing, said, "I only learn hymns by whether I can sing them without getting lost."

"That," Kenny said, "is a theological method of some merit."

By the time they reached St. Luke's, the yard was already filling with buggies, horses, and neighbors in their Sunday best. The little church stood plain and whitewashed, with weathered steps and blue trim that someone had once painted carefully and no one had since felt bold enough to improve. Cottonwoods shaded one side. A hand-rung bell hung in the small frame out front. There was nothing grand about the building except the purpose for which it stood.

And yet to Ginny, it was beautiful.

To Kenny too.

Churches built by the faithful usually are.

The moment they arrived, the social machinery of a western congregation went immediately into motion. Mrs. Bellamy approached with the expression of a woman trying very hard not to appear delighted by developments she had already shared with at least two people. Reverend Pike emerged from the front steps to greet folks with solemn warmth. Children darted around skirts and wagon wheels. A widower from the next ranch over pretended he had come early to pray when in truth he had come early to secure the best cinnamon bread after the service.

Ginny stepped down from the wagon, and Kenny was there at once to offer his hand.

It was a small gesture.
Proper.
Natural.

Yet in the eyes of half the churchyard, it might as well have been a proclamation.

Ginny accepted his help with calm dignity, though she felt the heat of awareness all the same. Not embarrassment exactly. More the strange tenderness of stepping into public view with something private and cherished.

Mrs. Bellamy reached them first.

"Well," she said, all innocence and satisfaction. "Don't you both look nice."

"Good morning, Mrs. Bellamy," Ginny said.

"Morning," Kenny added.

Mrs. Bellamy's eyes sparkled. "It is indeed."

Then she drifted away, having accomplished exactly what she meant to accomplish, which was to let them know she knew and approved.

Inside, the church was cool and shadowed, the wooden pews worn smooth by years of worship and weather. Sunlight filtered through plain glass windows and fell in pale bars across the aisle. The pulpit was modest. The altar was draped simply. Fresh flowers had been placed there—likely by Mrs. Alvarez, who believed beauty was a form of thanksgiving and arranged lilies like a woman making an offering.

The congregation settled slowly.

Kenny had attended worship in many places over the years—little chapels, revival tents, borrowed rooms, rough benches under open sky. But as he stepped into St. Luke's beside Miss Ginny, he felt a different kind of stirring in him. It was not just the holiness of the place. It was the feeling of entering it with her.

They took their place midway up on the left. Tommy slid into the pew beside Ginny, partly from habit and partly because he had not yet learned when not to place himself at the center of tender

adult arrangements. Kenny sat on her other side. Their shoulders did not touch, though both were aware how easily they might.

When the opening hymn began, the congregation rose in a gentle rustle of fabric and wood. Kenny sang in a quiet baritone. Ginny's voice, though not loud, was clear and sure, carrying the melody with the steady conviction of someone who believed what she sang.

Kenny had heard her laugh.
He had heard her speak scripture.
He had heard her say his name in moonlight.

But hearing her sing in church did something different to him.

It made him love her with reverence.

During the prayers, heads bowed all around them, and the little church became very still. Petitions were offered for rain in due season, for the sick, for travelers, for a widow whose youngest had taken fever, for peace between neighbors who had been feuding over a boundary line too long to remember who first took offense. Then Reverend Pike invited silent prayer.

Ginny bowed her head.

Her prayer was not dramatic. It was not even especially articulate. It rose from deeper than words.

Thank You, Lord.
For this day.
For this church.
For the ranch.
For Kenny.

Beside her, Kenny prayed too.

Not for certainty. Not for possession. Only gratitude and guidance.

Help me honor what You've given.
Help me be worthy of her trust.
Help me not to mistake joy for something I need to fear.

When the sermon came, Reverend Pike preached from Ruth—on steadfast love, faithful presence, and the holiness of choosing to stay when leaving would be easier. He was not an orator. His voice wandered at times, and his gestures might have stirred less dust than a sleeping mule. But the sermon was sincere, and sincerity has its own authority.

Kenny listened with growing stillness.

Whither thou goest…

The old scripture, spoken in that humble church, did not strike him as romantic first. It struck him as covenantal. As rooted. As the language of a love that does not flee hardship but joins itself to another's life with tenderness and resolve.

When Reverend Pike spoke of companionship in the fields of sorrow and the gleaning of grace after years of loss, Kenny felt something in him go quiet and deep. He did not look at Ginny during the sermon. He did not need to.

He could feel the truth drawing close between them all the same.

After the blessing, the congregation spilled into the churchyard and fellowship hall with the cheerful looseness of people who knew one another's stories, flaws, and pie preferences. Tables had been laid with casseroles, biscuits, preserves, cold chicken, pickled beans, and more desserts than any proper doctrine required. Conversations sparked in every direction.

Ginny was quickly drawn into three separate discussions—one about the altar flowers, one about a neighbor's baby, and one about whether the church roof would hold through summer storms without additional patching. Kenny found himself approached by a rotation of men who all pretended to be talking ranch matters while plainly measuring him for character.

Mr. Alvarez asked where he had learned to handle horses. Reverend Pike asked, with great seriousness, whether he preferred the old hymns to the newer ones, as if this were a decisive test of salvation. Bellamy asked how long he meant to stay at Sundance and received, in return, a calm look and the answer, "As long as I'm wanted."

That answer traveled fast enough to warm at least four female hearts in the fellowship room and give Mrs. Bellamy material for two weeks.

At one point Ginny looked across the room and saw Kenny kneeling slightly to speak with old Mrs. Talbot, who was nearly deaf, nearly blind, and entirely unimpressed by most people. He was listening to her with full attention, nodding and smiling as she told him, no doubt for the third time, how her late husband had once ridden thirty miles in a hailstorm to bring home a pie safe. There was patience in Kenny's face, but more than that—kindness freely given where no one was watching for credit.

Mrs. Talbot reached up and patted his cheek.

Ginny felt something sweet and aching move through her.

Mrs. Alvarez appeared at her elbow, following her line of sight.

"He has good hands," the older woman said.

Ginny blinked. "For ranch work?"

Mrs. Alvarez gave her a long look. "For life."

Then she moved away before Ginny could decide whether to laugh or blush.

Later, once dishes had been passed and conversations loosened, someone called for music. It was not uncommon. In small churches and ranch communities alike, worship and fellowship often bled gently into song. Jasper, who had brought his harmonica under the respectable fiction that it just happened to be in his pocket, was encouraged toward usefulness. A fiddle emerged from somewhere. Children were shushed, then ignored, then folded into the edges of the gathering.

Kenny was standing near the door when Tommy came charging up.

"Miss Ginny wants you."

Those four words were enough to send warmth through him before Tommy, with all the mercy of youth, added, "For a hymn, not for romance."

Kenny found Ginny near the piano, which was upright, slightly weather-beaten, and rarely precisely in tune. She was speaking with Mrs. Bellamy, who seemed absurdly pleased with herself.

Ginny looked at him and said, "Mrs. Bellamy informs me you can sing harmony."

Kenny cast a glance toward Mrs. Bellamy. "She informs a great many people of a great many things."

Mrs. Bellamy smiled serenely. "And am I wrong?"

Kenny looked back to Ginny. "Not entirely."

"Then stand here," Ginny said.

What followed was simple, and to those who loved them, unforgettable.

The congregation gathered around as Ginny led *Blessed Assurance* from the piano. Her voice carried the melody clear and steady. Kenny stood beside her and joined on the harmony line, low and warm, his voice supporting hers rather than overtaking it. Around them the church people sang too—some well, some valiantly, some in wandering keys entirely their own—but for a few minutes it seemed to Kenny that the whole room had arranged itself around the fact of her beside him and the grace of singing together.

Ginny felt it too.

Not performance.
Not display.

Union.

A joining of voices in praise, and something in that felt more intimate than a dozen whispered conversations under stars.

When the final verse ended, Reverend Pike wiped at one eye and blamed dust despite there being none. Mrs. Bellamy looked triumphant. Tommy applauded before remembering church custom and turning it awkwardly into a cough. Mateo nodded once. Eli, from the back, smiled without hiding it.

And Kenny, looking at Ginny with the hymn's last note still hanging in the room, thought:

I could build a life around this.

Not the song alone.
The woman.
The faith.
The steadiness.
The way her presence turned even a fellowship hall into holy ground.

On the ride home, the afternoon sun sloped warm over the desert. Tommy fell asleep in the wagon within ten minutes, his head lolling against a sack of hymnals and leftover rolls. Jasper and Bellamy rode ahead for part of the way discussing mules, politics, and whether a man could be truly converted if he still cheated at checkers. Mateo and Eli traveled behind, giving Ginny and Kenny, by accident or by mercy, a little space.

The road stretched quietly before them.

"That was a good service," Kenny said.

"It was."

She held the reins with relaxed hands, the horse settling into the familiar pace homeward.

"You looked happy," he said.

Ginny glanced at him. "So did you."

"I was."

The simple confession hung sweetly between them.

After a little while she said, "I liked singing with you."

He smiled. "I liked it too."

"Though I think Mrs. Bellamy had arranged the whole thing before either of us knew it."

"That woman could organize a wedding from a biscuit recipe and two glances."

Ginny laughed, low and warm, and the sound stayed with him the rest of the road.

When Sundance Ranch finally came into view again—barn, windmill, pasture, home—the place seemed unchanged and somehow brighter. Sunday had a way of doing that. Not altering the chores waiting to be done, but bathing them in meaning.

As Kenny helped Ginny down from the wagon, his hand steady at her waist for only the necessary second, both of them felt that the day had marked something.

Not a dramatic milestone.

Something quieter.

They had gone to church together.
Worshiped side by side.
Sung the same hymn.
Been seen by the people who knew them best and loved them anyway.

There is a kind of intimacy in that which moonlight alone cannot give.

That evening, after the animals were tended and the Sunday quiet settled again over Sundance, Ginny stood with Kenny by the porch while the last of the daylight faded west.

"I'm glad you were at St. Luke's today," she said.

He looked at her steadily. "So am I."

She lowered her eyes briefly, then lifted them again with that composed tenderness he had come to treasure.

"It felt right."

His answer came low and full.

"Yes," he said. "It did."

No more needed saying.

The desert evening gathered around them.
The church bells of memory still rang softly somewhere in the heart.
And over Sundance Ranch, faith and love had drawn one step closer together.

Chapter Eight: *The Porch Light at Sundance*

There are some lights a person never forgets.

A lantern in a hospital room.
A campfire on a cold night.
A church window glowing before dawn.
A lamp left burning in a farmhouse kitchen for someone not yet home.

To weary travelers and ranch hands and lonely souls alike, such lights say the same thing without a word:

You are expected.
You are wanted.
Come on in.

At Sundance Ranch, that light was the porch lamp.

It hung just to the left of the front door, plain and sturdy, with weathered brass and glass that had been cleaned so often by Miss Ginny's hands that it seemed always to glow a little warmer than other lamps. She lit it each evening as naturally as she set coffee on in the morning or bowed her head in prayer before supper. Sometimes it burned only for an hour or two before everyone was in for the night. Sometimes, if a hand was late from the far line or weather threatened trouble, it stayed lit long after midnight.

To most folks it was only a practical thing.

To Kenny, it had become something more.

He noticed it first on a Monday, a few days after the Sunday they had shared at St. Luke's.

The afternoon had been swallowed up by work. A section of fencing near the west pasture had gone down after a steer with more determination than sense found a weak point and took full advantage of it. By the time the cattle were rounded back, the post reset, and the wire tightened, dusk had already come on. Mateo and Eli had taken one trail home with the wagon. Kenny had stayed behind to finish what he could by hand and make certain the brace held through the night.

By the time he rode back toward the ranch, darkness had settled over the land.

The stars were out in clean profusion, and the moon had not yet risen. The desert lay wide and black around him, familiar and yet deeper somehow in the night. His horse moved at a steady pace, tired but willing. The leather creaked softly. The only other sounds were the occasional click of a hoof against stone and the far-off cry of some night creature that belonged more to the wild than to human company.

Then he came over the last rise and saw Sundance Ranch below.

Most of it lay in shadow.

The barn was a dark shape against the sky.
The corrals only lines and angles.
The bunkhouse gave off no more than the faintest suggestion of life.

But the porch light was burning.

Kenny slowed his horse without meaning to.

The little lamp cast a warm circle over the front steps and spread a soft amber glow across the porch rail. It did not light the whole ranch. It did not need to. It was enough to say where home was.

He sat there for a moment longer than necessary, looking down at it.

And in that moment he understood something that touched him more deeply than he would have expected from so small a thing.

Somebody had remembered he was still out.

Somebody had left a light on.

When he rode into the yard, the house door opened before he reached the hitch rail.

Miss Ginny stepped onto the porch with a shawl around her shoulders, the lamplight behind her outlining her in warm gold. She had clearly changed from her heavier work clothes, but not yet for bed. One glance told him she had not gone in to rest fully. She had been waiting up.

"You're late," she said.

It was not a scolding.

It was concern dressed in practical words.

Kenny dismounted and looped the reins over the rail. "Fence took longer than I expected."

"I gathered as much."

He looked up toward the porch lamp. "You left the light on."

She seemed faintly surprised by the weight he gave to the observation.

"Well," she said, "it would have been poor manners to let you ride in blind."

He smiled, but there was something in his eyes too deep for humor alone.

"Still," he said quietly, "thank you."

She looked at him then with fuller understanding.

"You're welcome, Kenny."

For a moment neither moved.

Then she said, "There's coffee still hot and stew warming if you've got sense enough left to eat."

"That depends how much sense the fence took out of me."

"Come find out."

Inside, the kitchen held the sort of warmth that only evening can give a house. Not daytime busyness. Not morning purpose. Something quieter. Lamps glowed low. The stove was still warm. The shadows in the corners were friendly ones. A bowl and spoon already sat waiting at the table.

Kenny stood just inside the door and removed his hat.

It was the kind of scene a man could survive years without and not realize how hungry he had grown for it until suddenly it was before him.

Ginny ladled stew into the bowl as if such things were common.

Maybe by now they were.

"You need bread too," she said.

"I won't argue."

"You had best not. I'm in command of the kitchen."

"I noticed."

She set the bowl before him and sat across the table with her own cup of coffee, not to eat again, but to keep him company while he did. That, more than the food, undid him a little.

Not outwardly.

But in the deep places.

He ate for a few minutes in grateful silence. Then he said, "There were years I used to come in late from one thing or another and nobody knew whether I was out or in."

Ginny's hand stilled around her cup.

He had not meant to say that aloud, perhaps. Or had not meant to say it so plainly.

But now that it was said, he did not take it back.

"Tonight," he went on, "that light meant more than you may know."

The kitchen grew very still.

Ginny answered with the tenderness of someone who understood more than she needed explained.

"Then I'm glad I left it burning."

He looked down at the table a moment, then back up.

"So am I."

After that, the porch light became a small language between them.

Neither named it.

Neither needed to.

If Kenny was out late finishing some chore or helping with a difficult foaling or riding in from the farther pasture, the lamp burned until he returned. If Ginny had gone into town and the road home stretched longer than expected, Kenny found reasons to linger near the yard until her wagon appeared, and the porch light was already lit before the wheels stopped turning.

Each time it said the same thing:

You are not forgotten.

That week, the days moved with their usual ranch steadiness. Work did not grow easier simply because two hearts had found a gentler rhythm. If anything, the season seemed determined to remind everyone that life required continued effort. There was feed to haul, a stubborn gate to replace, invoices to settle, and a calf born breech that gave Eli and Kenny an hour of hard labor and Tommy a lifelong story he would likely tell with increasing exaggeration.

Yet threaded through all of it was a growing peace.

Courtship had sweetened into something calmer now, less uncertain than before and no less tender for being steadier. Ginny and Kenny had begun to fall into each other's presence with the ease of people no longer wondering whether affection exists, only learning what shape it will take.

One evening, after supper, Jasper had gone to visit a cousin in town, Eli had retired early with a headache, Mateo had disappeared into the barn to do whatever mysterious and competent thing Mateo always found to do, and Tommy had been sent to bed after tracking half the yard into the washroom.

That left the house unusually quiet.

Ginny stepped out onto the porch carrying two cups of coffee and found Kenny already there leaning against the post, hat off, watching the last of the light drain from the sky.

"I thought you might still be awake," she said.

He accepted the cup from her. "That sounds dangerously close to confidence."

"It is confidence. I've learned your habits."

"That should concern us both."

She smiled and settled into the chair near the lamp.

Evening spread itself softly over Sundance Ranch. The sky faded from gold to rose to deep blue. The first stars trembled into view. From somewhere in the distance came the low, rhythmic sound of crickets beginning their night song. The porch light had not yet become necessary, but soon it would be.

Kenny looked at the lamp hanging beside the door.

"You know," he said, "I used to think home was mostly a place."

"And now?"

"Now I think it may be more often a person."

Ginny's eyes lifted to him.

He did not say anything after that. He did not press the thought or dress it up. He simply let it stand there between them in the evening air.

The porch, the ranch, the fading western sky—all of it seemed to gather around those words.

Ginny wrapped both hands around her cup.

"I used to think home was something you built by effort alone," she said after a while. "Boards. Meals. Work. Endurance. Paying attention to what needs mending."

"That's part of it."

"Yes." She looked out over the yard. "But perhaps that isn't all."

"No," he said quietly. "It isn't."

There are moments when two people feel the nearness of confession without yet naming everything fully. This was one of those moments.

The porch light glowed just above them now, warm against the gathering dark.

Ginny said, "I've been thinking about what Mrs. Alvarez told me at church."

"That you should not be afraid of a good thing?"

She glanced over, surprised. "How did you know that?"

He looked faintly pleased with himself. "Mrs. Alvarez told me she'd said something to you. She didn't repeat it, but she had the look of a woman satisfied with her own wisdom."

"That does sound like her."

He nodded. "I trust she was right."

Ginny's expression softened.

"She was."

The answer seemed to settle something in him.

Then, because the truth had grown easier between them, she added, "I think perhaps I'm not only unafraid now. I'm grateful."

Kenny did not speak for a moment. The porch light flickered softly in the breeze, though the flame held steady.

"At my age," he said at last, "a man doesn't expect surprise gifts from the Lord."

"And yet?"

"And yet here I am."

She looked at him fully then.

The light caught the lines of his face and gentled them. Age had not diminished him. It had refined him. There was steadiness there, and sorrow once borne, and humor held in reserve, and love now no longer hidden. She felt again what she had felt under the desert moon: not simply attraction, not simply comfort, but deep thankfulness for the man himself.

"You are here," she said.

The simplicity of it nearly broke his heart.

He rose from the post and came no nearer than the edge of her chair, close enough that the air between them warmed, not so close as to presume. She looked up at him with complete calm.

"Ginny," he said, "may I tell you something without sounding like an old fool?"

"That depends what the old fool intends to say."

His mouth moved in a smile. Then seriousness returned.

"When I ride in and see this porch light burning, I feel…" He paused, searching for the exact word. "Claimed, somehow. Not owned. Not trapped. Just…" He shook his head gently. "Remembered. Welcomed. Like I matter to someone before I've even stepped through the door."

Her eyes grew brighter in the lamplight.

"You do matter," she said.

The words were not grand.

They were better than grand.

He took them in with the reverence of a man receiving truth he had gone too long without hearing.

Then he said, voice low, "And you matter to me in the same way."

She set her coffee aside on the small table.

For a moment the whole porch seemed to hold still.

Then she reached out her hand.

He took it at once.

Their fingers closed together naturally now, without the earlier hesitation that had once made every touch feel like crossing sacred ground. It was still sacred. Only now it carried a growing familiarity too, the kind born when tenderness has been returned enough times to become trustworthy.

Kenny lowered himself onto the step beside her chair, still holding her hand.

Ginny looked down at him, and he up at her, porch light warm above, darkness soft beyond. There was something profoundly peaceful in the arrangement, as if neither needed to prove anything because both already knew.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He leaned one shoulder lightly against the side of her chair.

"That I could get used to this."

She smiled. "That sounds dangerous too."

"It is. I mean to continue anyway."

She let her fingers gently trace the back of his hand once, and the simple gesture was intimate enough to quiet him entirely.

Then she said, "When I first came to Sundance, I lit that porch lamp for myself."

He listened without interrupting.

"For courage, maybe. For company, even if no one came. For the feeling that a light in the darkness meant I was not entirely alone."

The honesty of that reached him deeply.

"And now?" he asked.

She looked toward the lamp.

"Now I light it for us."

Kenny bowed his head once, overcome in that quiet masculine way that makes a man more still instead of more expressive.

When he looked up again, his eyes held a brightness the lamp alone had not put there.

"Ginny," he said, "you say things a man could build the rest of his life around."

She gave a soft breath that might have been a laugh and might have been tears held gently in check.

"Then build wisely, cowboy."

He lifted her hand and kissed it—not dramatically, not as a flourish, but with deep, tender gratitude.

For a long while after that, they remained there on the porch while the ranch slept and the stars took their full places overhead. They spoke of small things and large ones. Of weather signs and favorite hymns. Of people they had loved and lost. Of what made a house feel holy. Of how some evenings seem almost transparent to grace.

At one point Kenny said, "If a man were to ask one day whether he might hang his hat here for good, what do you suppose you would say?"

Ginny looked at him carefully.

"That depends," she said.

"On what?"

"On whether he intends to help keep the porch light burning."

A smile moved slowly through him, deep and unmistakably joyful.

"I believe," he said, "that I would."

She did not answer in words.

She did not need to.

Instead she stood, and he rose with her, and in the warm circle of the porch light she placed one hand against his cheek and kissed him gently. It was not the wonder of a first kiss under moonlight. It was something quieter and, in its own way, deeper.

A kiss of homecoming.

When they parted, the lamp burned steadily beside them, patient and golden.

Inside the house, the clock ticked on.
Outside, the wind moved softly across the dark pasture.
And Sundance Ranch, held between starlight and lamplight, seemed to rest in a peace both of them could feel.

Later, after Ginny had gone inside and Kenny stood one last moment in the yard before turning toward the bunkhouse, he looked back at the porch.

The lamp was still burning.

He smiled to himself then, the kind of smile a man wears when gratitude has gone beyond words and become part of his breathing.

There are some lights a person never forgets.

And for Kenny, from that night on, the porch light at Sundance would never again be just a lamp.

It would be her welcome.
Her faith.
Her heart.
Their beginning.

Chapter Nine: *A Ring of Promise*

There are moments in a person's life that begin long before the day they arrive.

A promise may be spoken in one season, but its roots often reach back through a hundred smaller mercies—the first meeting, the first kindness, the first look that lingers, the first prayer whispered not only for oneself but for another.

So it was with the ring.

It did not begin in a store window or in a jeweler's case.

It began in Kenny's heart the first time he saw the porch light burning for him.
It deepened under the desert moon.
It steadied itself in church pews, in shared coffee, in fence lines mended side by side, in laughter on the porch and quiet evenings where nothing spectacular happened except love growing stronger.

By the time the thought formed clearly enough to be named, it did not feel sudden.

It felt right.

The morning Kenny decided to go into town, the sun rose pale and cool behind thin cloud. The air carried that faint edge which hinted the season was beginning to shift again. Sundance Ranch was already alive with the ordinary music of labor—buckets, boots, low voices, the clink of tack. Nothing in the yard announced that the day would matter more than others.

Kenny preferred it that way.

He had not spoken yet to Ginny of any formal promise beyond courtship. He was too respectful to rush such a thing, too seasoned to confuse feeling with readiness. But in recent weeks, the question had begun to settle into him with increasing certainty—not whether he loved her, and not whether she loved him, but what faithful shape that love was now meant to take.

A ring was not magic.

It would not create what did not already exist.

But it could honor it.

He was tightening a cinch near the barn when Mateo came up carrying a toolbox and stopped with the quiet intuition of a man who missed very little.

"You are thinking hard," Mateo said.

Kenny glanced over. "Is it that obvious?"

"To anyone with eyes."

Kenny smiled faintly and tugged once more at the strap. "That rules out Jasper."

Mateo ignored this with dignity.

After a pause, he said, "You have that look men get when they are about to do something brave or foolish."

"Could be both."

Mateo leaned one shoulder against the post. "Usually is."

Kenny rested a hand on the saddle and looked out toward the house, where Ginny had just stepped onto the porch with a ledger tucked beneath her arm. Even at that distance, the sight of her moved something quiet and grateful in him. She paused to speak to Tommy, handed him the ledger, and turned toward the corral with the same calm authority that had first drawn his admiration before it ever touched his heart more deeply.

"I've been thinking," Kenny said.

"That is always a dangerous beginning."

"Yes," Kenny replied, "but maybe not a bad one."

Mateo followed his gaze toward the house and said nothing.

At length Kenny asked, "Did you ever know a thing was right before you knew how to say it?"

Mateo's expression shifted, not quite softening, but deepening.

"Yes."

Kenny nodded, more to himself than to the other man. "That's where I am."

Mateo waited.

Kenny looked back at him. "If I were to ask Miss Ginny for something more than courtship…"

The old ranch hand's brow lifted only slightly.

"…would you think me hasty?"

Mateo was silent for so long that Tommy, passing by with a feed scoop, glanced nervously between them and kept walking.

Finally Mateo said, "No."

That one word seemed to clear the air.

Kenny let out a breath he had not realized he was holding.

Mateo added, "If you were another kind of man, I would."

Kenny looked at him fully then.

"But you have not rushed her," Mateo said. "You have honored her. You have worked beside her. You have made this ranch stronger, not weaker. And when she looks at you…" He gave the smallest shrug. "Even Jasper can see it."

"That is a disturbing measure."

"It is still true."

Kenny smiled and lowered his eyes briefly. "I've been thinking of going into town today."

Mateo nodded once. "Then go."

No dramatic blessing followed. Mateo was not a man for speeches. But as he turned to leave, he said, "Choose something worthy of her."

Kenny watched him go, feeling oddly steadied.

Later that morning he found an excuse involving nails, lamp oil, and feed inventory that was sound enough to survive Ginny's practical scrutiny. She stood with one hand on the porch rail, listening as he listed the supplies.

"We could manage another day or two on the lamp oil," she said.

"We could."

"And the nails?"

"We're lower than I'd like."

She considered. "Fair enough."

There was the faintest narrowing of her eyes then, as if some deeper instinct had stirred but not yet spoken plainly.

"You need anything else while you're in town?"

Kenny held her gaze with what he hoped was ordinary calm. "I'll see what looks necessary."

"That answer," she said, "rarely improves a man's budget."

"I'll do my best."

The corner of her mouth moved. "Do better than that."

He tipped his hat. "Yes, ma'am."

As he rode out, he could feel her watching him a moment longer than usual. Not suspiciously. Just thoughtfully.

The road into town seemed longer that day, though the distance had not changed. Dust rose beneath his horse's hooves in pale clouds. The sun climbed. Somewhere along the way, Bellamy passed him in the opposite direction with a wagon full of sacks and opinions.

"You look determined," Bellamy called.

"That a crime?"

"Depends what for."

Kenny kept riding, which Bellamy interpreted, rightly, as confirmation that something worth gossiping about was underway.

The town itself was much as it always was—half practical, half performance. Horses tied outside the mercantile. Wagon wheels creaking. Men talking weather as if they personally supervised it. Women carrying baskets and news with equal efficiency. Children being told not to run and doing so anyway.

Kenny bought the nails first, then the lamp oil, then a few other items that would keep his visit respectable in memory if anyone later reconstructed it. Only after that did he stand for a moment outside the small jeweler's and watch his own reflection in the glass.

It had been many years since he had entered such a place for such a reason.

His heart, steady under storm and labor, behaved now with surprising force.

At last he pushed the door open.

The jeweler was an older man named Mr. Finch, thin as a fence rail and twice as exact. He looked up over his spectacles with the dry expression of one who had seen many human dramas pass through his shop disguised as purchases.

"Can I help you?"

Kenny removed his hat. "I hope so."

Mr. Finch studied him for half a breath, then said, "That usually means a woman."

"Yes, sir."

"Then let us proceed carefully."

The shop smelled faintly of cedar drawers, metal polish, and old velvet. Light fell across the glass cases in narrow beams, catching on watches, chains, brooches, and rings arranged with the solemnity of objects that might alter lives.

Mr. Finch unlocked a tray and set out several rings.

Kenny looked at them, but not greedily, not dazzled. He was not searching for expense. He was searching for truth.

Some were too ornate.
Some too flashy.
Some too delicate for the woman he loved—not because Ginny lacked refinement, but because nothing gaudy would ever suit the strength and grace of her.

Then he saw one.

It was simple, elegant, and quietly beautiful. A gold band with a small stone set firm and clear, not so large it shouted, but bright enough to catch and hold light. It looked like something meant not for show, but for keeping.

Kenny picked it up carefully.

"That one," he said.

Mr. Finch watched him over his spectacles. "You chose quickly."

"I knew when I saw it."

"Hm." The jeweler nodded, apparently approving of certainty when it was not boastful. "And does the lady share your good sense?"

Kenny smiled slowly. "She has more of it than I do."

Mr. Finch wrapped the ring in a small box and tied it with string.

As Kenny paid, the older man said, more gently than before, "Whatever you say when you ask her, make sure it sounds like you."

Kenny took the box and slipped it safely into his inside pocket.

"Yes, sir," he said. "That's the only way I know."

The ride home felt different.

Not lighter exactly. More solemn in a good way.

The ring rested close against his chest with each movement of the horse. He did not reach for it. He did not need to. Its presence was enough.

He found himself praying as he rode—not in polished language, but in the simple inward speech of a man who knows God hears what the heart cannot always order into perfect sentences.

Let me do this rightly.
Let me speak honestly.
Let me honor her.
And if she says yes, let me spend the years You give me proving worthy of it.

When Sundance Ranch came into view, the porch stood warm beneath the afternoon light. Ginny was in the yard near the corral speaking with Eli, ledger in hand, wind tugging lightly at the hem of

her skirt. Tommy was mending something with a seriousness entirely out of proportion to his age. Jasper, seated on an overturned bucket in the shade, appeared to be supervising the universe.

Kenny rode in as steadily as if his heart were not beating harder than it had any right to.

Ginny looked up at once.

"You found the lamp oil?"

"Yes."

"And the nails?"

"Yes."

She tilted her head slightly. "And whatever else looked necessary?"

Kenny dismounted. "A few things."

There was something in his face that made her pause. Just a flicker. But enough.

She did not press, perhaps because she trusted him, perhaps because something in her already sensed the shape of the evening yet to come.

That afternoon seemed to stretch with deliberate slowness. Every chore took on a strange brightness in Kenny's awareness, not because the tasks themselves had changed, but because he moved through them carrying a promise not yet spoken. He helped Mateo replace a cracked board in the chicken coop, answered Tommy's questions with only occasional delay, and nearly dropped a hammer once when Jasper began, out of nowhere, speculating on whether women preferred polished compliments or plain speech from a man.

"You askin' for yourself?" Kenny said.

"No," Jasper replied. "I've accepted my limitations."

Mateo, nearby, said, "A wise beginning."

Evening came at last.

The sunset poured red and gold across the ranch, setting the windows aflame for a brief few minutes before the light softened into dusk. Supper was eaten. The dishes were washed. One by one the others drifted away to their own corners of the night until at last the yard had grown quiet and the porch lamp had been lit.

Ginny stepped outside with her shawl around her shoulders.

Kenny was already there.

Something in the set of his shoulders, the stillness of him, told her at once that this was no ordinary evening. Her own pulse shifted in answer, not from fear, but from the deep instinct that sometimes knows before the mind is fully told.

"You are very quiet," she said.

He turned toward her, and though the porch light was warm, the look in his eyes outshone it.

"I've got something to ask you."

That was enough.

The world seemed suddenly hushed around them—the wind gentler, the stars nearer, the whole ranch holding its breath with her.

Ginny came to stand before him in the lamplight.

"All right," she said softly.

Kenny removed his hat and held it at his side. For a moment he simply looked at her, and in that look was everything he had come to know and cherish: her strength, her faith, her beauty, her steadiness, the warmth she carried beneath her composure, the life she had built, the love she had allowed him to enter.

When he spoke, his voice was low and true.

"Ginny, I did not come to Sundance looking for this. I came tired. Road-worn. Expecting little more than work and one more place to sleep awhile."

She listened without moving.

"But the Lord, in His mercy, had more in mind than I did." He smiled faintly, reverently. "He led me to you."

Her eyes shone, but she remained steady.

Kenny went on. "You have become to me more than the woman I love. You have become home. Not because you ask me to be less myself, but because with you I've found I can be more truly the man I hoped to be."

No one else heard those words.

No one else was meant to.

"I love your strength," he said. "Your kindness. Your courage. The way you carry this ranch. The way you laugh when it surprises you. The way your faith lives not only in scripture and church, but in work and welcome and the porch light left burning."

At that, one tear slipped free down Ginny's cheek.

Kenny's voice gentled even more.

"I do not promise you a life without hardship, because no honest man can. I do not promise that sorrow will never knock again, because this world does not make such bargains. But I can promise you this: I will honor you. I will stand beside you. I will work with you, pray with you, laugh with you, and love you faithfully as long as the Lord gives me breath."

Then, slowly, he reached into his coat and brought out the small box.

Ginny drew in a soft breath.

Kenny opened it.

The ring caught the porch light and held it, a small bright flame of its own.

"Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch," he said, and now his voice carried both tenderness and quiet wonder, "would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

For a moment she could not speak.

The whole of her life seemed to gather behind her in that instant—every season of endurance, every prayer prayed in loneliness, every task carried alone, every hope surrendered and every hope rediscovered. And there before her stood Kenny, not offering fantasy, not asking for rescue, but offering companionship, faithfulness, and a love strong enough to stand in the real world.

Her hand rose to her mouth, trembling just a little.

"Yes," she whispered.

Kenny's whole face changed.

Not into triumph.

Into gratitude so deep it almost looked like grief redeemed.

Ginny gave a soft, tearful laugh and repeated, stronger now, "Yes, Kenny. I will."

He closed his eyes briefly, as though taking in the answer all the way through, then looked at her again with such tenderness that she felt herself loved clear to the soul.

"May I?" he asked.

She held out her left hand.

He slid the ring onto her finger slowly, reverently. It fit as though it had been waiting for her.

Ginny looked down at it in the porch light, then back up at him, tears still bright and unhidden now.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"So are you."

That made her laugh softly through the tears, and then he gathered her carefully into his arms.

They held each other there beneath the porch lamp, not young, not foolish, not dreaming against reality—but standing within it, blessed all the more because they knew the worth of what had been given.

After a long moment, Ginny drew back just enough to rest her hands against his chest.

"You asked me like a gentleman," she said.

"I was hoping to."

"And you made me cry."

"That part was not strategic."

She smiled through the tears. "Good."

He bent and kissed her then, warm and tender and full of promise. Not a kiss of uncertainty, nor even only of discovery. A kiss that sealed something spoken plainly and received with joy.

From the bunkhouse porch came, after a respectfully delayed interval, Jasper's stage whisper:

"Well?"

Ginny closed her eyes. Kenny laughed against her forehead.

Mateo's voice followed at once. "You will know when they are ready to tell you."

"I already know," Jasper whispered back, not in the least whispering.

Then Tommy's voice, unmistakably excited and absolutely not asleep as he ought to have been:

"Did she say yes?"

Ginny stepped back enough to call toward the dark, "Go to bed, Tommy."

"That means yes!" he shouted.

A cheer rose from the bunkhouse so sudden and wholehearted that even Eli, who rarely raised his voice for anything short of stampede or scripture, could be heard offering a pleased whoop.

Kenny laughed outright then, and Ginny joined him, one hand lifted instinctively to the ring now shining on her finger.

"Well," she said, "there goes our private moment."

He looked at her with a joy so steady and bright it needed no privacy to sustain it.

"I think," he said, "it has gone into public ministry."

She laughed again, and there in the warm circle of the porch light, with the ranch half-awake and rejoicing around them, the promise between them settled into something real and blessed.

Later, when the noise had faded and the others had finally granted them a little peace, Ginny stood at the window inside the house and looked down at her hand.

The ring gleamed softly in the lamplight.

A ring of promise.

Not only promise of a wedding day yet to come, but of companionship, shared burdens, laughter, prayer, home, and the continuing grace of two lives joined not in haste, but in holy timing.

Behind her, Kenny came to stand quietly near.

She turned toward him, and for a moment they said nothing at all.

Then Ginny held up her hand once more, admiring the ring like a woman both delighted and deeply moved.

"It still feels almost too wonderful."

Kenny stepped closer.

"No," he said softly. "It feels exactly wonderful enough."

She looked at him, and the love in her gaze was answer enough for any man.

Outside, the porch light at Sundance still burned.
Inside, a new promise shone brighter still.
And over the ranch, the stars kept watch on a love that had grown steady enough to wear a ring.

Chapter Ten: *Wedding Plans at Sundance*

Once a promise had been spoken aloud and sealed with a ring, Sundance Ranch changed in ways both small and unmistakable.

Not in its duties.

The horses still needed feeding.
The fences still leaned where they ought not.
The wind still found the weak places in every gate and every plan.
Bills still came. Dust still gathered. Coffee still disappeared at a rate no honest accounting could fully explain.

But beneath all of that, joy had entered the daily rhythm of the place with a new kind of permanence.

Miss Ginny was engaged.

Kenny was no longer merely courting her.

And everyone at Sundance, from the bunkhouse to the barn cats, seemed to know it.

The news traveled across the ranch before sunrise the next morning, despite the fact that nearly everyone had already heard the answer from the bunkhouse porch the night before. Tommy, who considered himself now a direct witness to history, told the story at breakfast with such enthusiasm and so little concern for accuracy that by the time he finished, Kenny had apparently proposed while standing heroically against the sunset, with one knee in the dirt and the porch light shining like a halo.

"I never knelt," Kenny said.

Tommy looked disappointed. "You should have. It sounds better."

Ginny buttered a biscuit with calm precision. "A man ought not be required to injure his good trousers for romance."

"That," Jasper declared, "is one of the finest principles I have ever heard."

Mateo sipped his coffee and said, "The boy's story will improve by noon. Best stop correcting it."

Eli, who had been smiling into his plate for the better part of five minutes, finally looked up and said, "Congratulations."

There was such quiet sincerity in it that both Kenny and Ginny answered at once.

"Thank you."

For a moment their voices overlapped, and Tommy grinned like a fox in a henhouse.

"There," he said, pointing with his fork. "You even sound married already."

Ginny fixed him with a look that would have sent a lesser soul into repentance. "Eat your eggs."

"Yes'm."

But the truth was, Tommy had touched on something real.

There was already a new harmony between Kenny and Ginny—not less respectful, not less careful, but fuller now. Their affection no longer hovered at the edge of future possibility. It had become a chosen path.

And once people on a ranch know a wedding is coming, they become very nearly impossible.

By midmorning, Mrs. Bellamy had arrived in a buggy with the speed and purpose of a woman who believed divine providence had finally rewarded her patience. She carried a pie nobody had requested, two yards of lace no one had approved, and opinions enough to furnish a courthouse.

"My dears," she said as if she herself had arranged the engagement from heaven's side of the matter, "we must begin planning at once."

Ginny, who had been standing on the porch checking feed figures, lowered the ledger and regarded her steadily.

"We must?"

Mrs. Bellamy smiled more brightly. "Indeed."

Kenny, who knew better than to remain within conversational range of two determined women at the beginning of wedding talk, made a deeply practical observation about needing to check the south trough and moved toward the yard.

"Coward," Ginny murmured.

He glanced back with a grin. "Survivor."

Mrs. Bellamy, undeterred, swept past them into the house as though invited by ancient right.

Within half an hour she had been joined by Mrs. Alvarez, who brought sense; by Mrs. Talbot, who brought hearing trouble and a memory for weddings that had happened before statehood; and by Reverend Pike's sister, Miriam, who brought a notebook and the grave expression of one preparing to negotiate peace among nations.

The kitchen table disappeared beneath cups, scraps of paper, fabric swatches, and enough suggestions to build three weddings and a county fair besides.

Kenny, from the barn doorway, watched this gathering and said to Mateo, "I've seen military operations with less coordination."

Mateo did not look up from the bridle he was oiling. "Do not go in there unless summoned."

"That serious?"

"Yes."

Jasper wandered up just in time to hear this. "What's happening?"

"Wedding plans," Kenny said.

Jasper went pale. "I'll pray for you."

The truth was that Ginny did not wish for extravagance.

By noon this had become abundantly clear.

"I am not wearing twelve yards of white satin," she said firmly.

Mrs. Bellamy looked pained. "Not twelve, no. That would overwhelm the room. But some trim—"

"No."

"A veil?"

"No."

"Orange blossoms?"

"Certainly not."

Mrs. Alvarez, seated beside her, hid a smile in her coffee cup.

"What I want," Ginny said, with the calm authority that had once sent Benton Crowe off her land and would now, if necessary, send lace and orange blossoms after him, "is a simple, beautiful church wedding at St. Luke's. Family, friends, people from the ranch, and anyone from town who can behave themselves."

"Then Bellamy cannot come," Mrs. Talbot announced, having misheard nearly everything but somehow arriving at the spirit of things.

This produced enough laughter to settle the room.

Ginny continued, "I want scripture. Hymns. Flowers if they are local and lovely. Good food after. Nothing fussy."

Mrs. Bellamy sighed, but Miriam Reverend Pike's sister nodded approvingly and wrote with speed.

"Simple church wedding. Floral restraint. No fruit on hats unless already owned."

"That last note is unnecessary," Ginny said.

"It is for Bellamy's wife," Mrs. Alvarez replied.

So the plans began to take shape.

A Saturday afternoon wedding, to allow ranch folk time to come in.
St. Luke's decorated with wildflowers, cotton branches, and lanterns.
A meal afterward under the cottonwoods if the weather held, or in the fellowship room if it did not.
Music led by whoever could carry tune faithfully and loudly enough to support the weaker brethren.
And a dress—not extravagant, not plain, but worthy.

That last matter became the next battleground.

Kenny was spared most of it, though not entirely. In the afternoon Ginny came out to the porch, where he was mending a strap in peaceful ignorance, and stood watching him for a moment before speaking.

"I need to go to town tomorrow."

He looked up. "For wedding things?"

She gave him a level look. "That is the phrase, yes."

He tried not to smile too obviously. "Do you want company?"

"No."

He bowed his head. "Understood."

After a pause, she added, "Mrs. Alvarez and Miriam are coming."

"That sounds less like shopping and more like an armed escort."

"It may become one."

He set down the strap and looked at her ring hand resting against the porch rail. The stone caught the afternoon light in the quiet way he loved, bright without boasting.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

The question was simple, but he meant more than dress fittings and church schedules.

Ginny understood.

She looked out across the yard, where Tommy was trying to teach a barn cat to sit and failing on every imaginable level.

"Happy," she said.

Then she glanced back at him, and there was that softness in her face he had come to treasure.

"And a little overwhelmed."

He stood and came to her, not too close, but near enough that his presence could steady without crowding.

“That seems fitting,” he said.

“I do not enjoy being overwhelmed.”

“No,” he agreed. “You prefer to do the overwhelming.”

That brought a laugh out of her.

“Careful, cowboy.”

“I’m engaged. It’s emboldened me.”

She shook her head, smiling. “The Lord will humble you.”

“I expect He already has. You said yes.”

That left her smiling in silence a moment longer than before.

The next day proved Kenny right about the armed escort.

Ginny rode into town in the wagon beside Mrs. Alvarez, with Miriam in the back and a basket of sandwiches that suggested no one trusted the process to conclude quickly. By sunset they returned not merely with one dress wrapped carefully in muslin, but with shoes, gloves, ribbon, a small veil Ginny had not entirely rejected, and enough fabric and notions to suggest that weddings multiply supplies by mysterious law.

Tommy met the wagon at a run.

“Did you get the dress?”

Ginny stepped down with dignity. “That is generally the purpose of shopping for one.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like none of your business.”

Tommy stopped in his tracks, chastened but not discouraged.

Mrs. Alvarez leaned down from the seat and said, “It is beautiful.”

Tommy looked toward the house with the reverence of a boy imagining sacred relics.

Kenny came from the barn wiping his hands on a rag. He saw the muslin-wrapped parcel in Ginny’s arms and felt something move through him that had nothing to do with cloth.

It was becoming real in a new way now.

There would be a day.
A sanctuary.
A vow.

A future no longer spoken of in soft outlines but nearing with every plan made and every decision settled.

He did not ask to see the dress. He knew better.

Instead he said, "How did the campaign go?"

Ginny handed the parcel carefully to Miriam and came toward him across the yard.

"We have survived."

"Victory, then?"

"Conditional."

He lowered his voice. "Should I be afraid of lace?"

"You should be afraid of women who travel with measuring tape and conviction."

"I already am."

That evening they walked together after supper, the wedding plans still hovering in the air around the ranch like the scent of rain before a storm. Only this storm would bring flowers, hymn books, and pies enough to feed a battalion.

The sun had nearly set. The whole western sky was washed in amber and rose, while the first stars waited at the edges for their turn. They moved slowly toward the cottonwoods by the wash, where the evening breeze ran cooler and gentler.

Ginny's hand found Kenny's naturally now as they walked.

There was still sweetness in that simple joining.

"What kind of wedding did you imagine when you were younger?" he asked after a while.

She thought about it. "Probably something prettier than practical."

"And now?"

She smiled faintly. "Now I want something holy."

He looked at her with deep approval. "That sounds like you."

She glanced at him. "And you?"

Kenny looked out toward the ranch, the porch lamp just beginning to glow in the distance.

"When I was younger," he said, "I might have thought more about the day itself. The crowd. The moment." He paused. "Now I think more about the life after."

Something in that answer reached her deeply.

"Yes," she said quietly. "So do I."

They stopped near the edge of the wash where the cottonwoods whispered overhead.

Kenny turned toward her. "Ginny, I want you to know something before all the noise of planning gets any louder."

She waited.

"I would marry you with two witnesses, a Bible, and no flowers at all if that's what life required." His voice deepened with feeling. "Everything else is a blessing, but it isn't the heart of it."

Her eyes searched his face.

"And what is the heart of it?" she asked.

He lifted her hand and kissed the ring.

"You," he said. "And the vow."

No amount of lace or flowers or church bells could have meant more to her than that.

She stepped nearer and rested her free hand against his chest.

"That is the heart of it for me too."

They stood that way until the last of the sunlight drained away and evening fully came to claim the land.

At Sundance Ranch, wedding preparations became part of the ranch rhythm over the next week.

Tommy volunteered for everything and was trusted with very little.
Jasper volunteered for nothing and was assigned plenty.
Eli quietly repaired the folding tables from St. Luke's without being asked.
Mateo built a fresh arbor frame near the cottonwoods in case the reception spread outdoors, then acted as if such skill with festive structures were beneath comment.
Mrs. Bellamy arrived every other day with updates, worries, and pies.
Mrs. Alvarez kept the entire affair from tipping into nonsense by the force of her practical wisdom alone.

Even the church seemed to lean toward the coming day. On Sunday, Reverend Pike preached a sermon so transparently centered on covenant, patience, and God's faithfulness in later seasons of life that half the congregation smiled at Ginny and Kenny before the first hymn had ended.

Afterward, Mrs. Talbot cornered Kenny by the fellowship table and patted his arm.

"You look nervous," she said.

"I'm not."

"You should be."

Then she walked off with a deviled egg and no further explanation.

The greatest peace, however, came not from the plans but from the quiet moments between them.

One evening Ginny sat at the front-room table reviewing a list of names while Kenny repaired a chair rung nearby. Lamps glowed low. The house was peaceful. Outside, the wind moved soft over the pasture.

Without looking up, Ginny said, "Do you suppose marriage changes people?"

Kenny fitted the rung in place and considered.

"Yes," he said. "But not always the way folks think."

"How then?"

He set the chair aside and looked at her.

"I think a good marriage gives people more room to become who they were meant to be."

She held his gaze over the lamplight and paper.

"That sounds very wise."

"It sounds like something I hope is true."

She folded her list and smiled slowly. "I think it is."

The porch light burned outside as always.

Steady. Warm. Faithful.

A sign of welcome.
A sign of home.
A sign now not only of what had begun, but of what was drawing nearer with each passing day.

At last, one night not long before the wedding, Ginny stood before the mirror in her room and held the dress against herself once more in the privacy of lamplight. It was lovely, just as Mrs. Alvarez had promised. Not showy. Not overly adorned. But graceful, strong in line, and softened by little details that made it feel less like costume and more like joy made visible.

She looked at her reflection, then down at the ring on her hand.

All her life had led here—not because life had been a straight line toward happiness, but because grace had kept gathering the broken, the beautiful, the ordinary, and the surprising into one continuing story.

There was a knock at the doorframe.

Kenny did not enter. He only spoke softly from the hall.

"Ginny?"

She turned, dress still in her hands. "Yes?"

"I only wanted to say goodnight."

Her heart warmed at the sound of his voice.

"Goodnight, Kenny."

A pause.

Then: "I love you."

Simple.
True.
Never wasted.

She smiled to herself before answering.

"And I love you."

His footsteps moved away then, gentle on the boards.

Ginny looked once more at her reflection, at the dress, at the ring, at the woman she had become through sorrow and strength and unexpected love.

Then she laid the dress carefully across the bed and extinguished the lamp.

Outside, Sundance Ranch rested under the stars.
Inside, wedding plans had become wedding hope.
And in the hush before sleep, both she and Kenny carried the same quiet certainty:

The day was coming.

And it would be beautiful.

Chapter Eleven: *The Night Before Forever*

The night before a wedding carries its own kind of hush.

Not the hush of sorrow.
Not the hush of fear.
Not even the hush of ordinary evening when the chores are done and a ranch settles itself under the stars.

It is a fuller silence than that.

A waiting silence.

The kind that seems to gather all the roads behind two people and hold them gently at the edge of what comes next.

So it was at Sundance Ranch on the night before Kenny and Ginny were to be married.

The day had been full from sunrise onward. Tables had been hauled to St. Luke's and back again. Lanterns had been cleaned and checked. Extra chairs had been borrowed from neighbors who would gladly have offered more if asked. Mrs. Bellamy had appeared twice, once with pies and once with concerns no one could prove were necessary. Tommy had been sent on so many errands that by late afternoon he had begun announcing each task as if he were a cavalry officer receiving battlefield orders. Jasper had complained about folding linens, then folded them better than anyone expected. Eli had quietly seen to the horses that would be needed tomorrow. Mateo had done a dozen essential things without reporting any of them.

And over all of it, like sunlight over open country, lay the steady truth:

Tomorrow.

By supper time the ranch was tired in the satisfying way that follows meaningful labor. The meal itself was simpler than usual, partly because everyone was busy, partly because no one had the calm for a long table evening. Talk rose and fell in pockets. Tommy tried to guess how many people would come. Jasper claimed weddings always brought at least three unexpected cousins and one crying child. Mrs. Alvarez, who had stayed late to help Ginny with final matters, declared that if the weather held and Bellamy kept his opinions to himself, the day would be close enough to perfect for Christian people.

Ginny smiled at that, though she felt the strange trembling joy beneath her ribs all through the meal.

Not nerves exactly.

Not uncertainty.

Just the deep awareness that life was about to cross a threshold.

When the dishes had been washed and the final practicalities spoken over, the others drifted away one by one. Mrs. Alvarez went home with a basket on one arm and authority still in her posture. Tommy was finally sent to bed before excitement wore him past all usefulness. Jasper disappeared toward the bunkhouse muttering about needing his rest if he was to stand witness to history. Eli checked the barn one last time. Mateo closed the chicken coop and, passing Kenny in the yard, said only, "Sleep if you can."

Kenny smiled faintly. "That unlikely?"

Mateo's expression did not change. "For honest men, yes."

Then even he withdrew into the quiet of the night.

At last the yard belonged to starlight, wind, and the soft sounds of a ranch settling to rest.

Ginny stood alone for a while in her room, the wedding dress hanging where she could see it in the low lamplight. It seemed at once entirely real and still somehow wondrous. The fabric caught the glow gently. The veil rested nearby, simple and modest, no longer an intrusion but a fitting part of the day to come. Her gloves lay folded neatly. On the dresser, the ring Kenny had given her gleamed with a quiet steadiness she had come to love.

She touched it lightly with one finger.

Tomorrow.

The word moved through her like prayer.

She had lived enough years to know that marriage was not made by beauty alone, nor by feeling, nor by the glow of candlelight and hymns however dear those things might be. Marriage was made by covenant. By daily choosing. By faithfulness when life was easy and when it was not. By gentleness. By endurance. By grace.

And because she knew that, the joy before her did not feel shallow.

It felt sacred.

There came a soft knock at her half-open door.

It was not Kenny.

Mrs. Alvarez stepped in carrying a folded shawl over one arm.

"I thought you might need this tomorrow morning if the air is cool."

Ginny smiled. "You think of everything."

"No," Mrs. Alvarez said, coming farther into the room. "Only the things people forget when they are in love."

That brought a quiet laugh from Ginny.

Mrs. Alvarez laid the shawl over the chair and then stood for a moment looking at her. There was affection in the older woman's face, but also something like understanding born of years.

"You are happy," she said.

Ginny answered without hesitation. "Yes."

Mrs. Alvarez nodded as though receiving news she had already trusted but was still glad to hear aloud.

"That is a beautiful thing."

Ginny's voice softened. "It is."

A pause rested between them, easy and full.

Then Mrs. Alvarez said, "Do you want advice, or only company?"

Ginny smiled. "You are going to give one of them regardless."

"That is true."

She sat lightly on the edge of the bed and folded her hands.

"When I married my husband, I was young enough to think love would carry us simply because it was strong. And it did carry us, but not simply. Life is never simple for long. What keeps a marriage is not only tenderness, though God knows tenderness matters. It is remembering, when the days are hard, that you are not on opposite sides of the trouble."

Ginny listened closely.

"You and Kenny already know something about weathering life," Mrs. Alvarez continued. "That is a gift, strange though it sounds. Young people sometimes mistake feeling for foundation. You two are building on something steadier."

Ginny looked down at the ring again and turned it slightly in the lamplight.

"I think so too."

Mrs. Alvarez rose and came near enough to kiss her cheek.

"Then sleep if you can, mija. Tomorrow will be full of joy, and joy has its own way of tiring a person."

When she was gone, the room felt both quieter and warmer for her having been there.

Across the yard, Kenny sat alone on the porch step outside the bunkhouse, hat in his hands, looking up at the stars.

The men had mostly turned in, though Jasper was still muttering somewhere within about whether church shoes had always been this unnatural. A low lantern burned near the doorway. The air had

cooled pleasantly, and the ranch stretched dark and peaceful around him. The porch light at the house still glowed, though lower now, as if keeping one final gentle watch over the evening.

Kenny let his gaze rest on it.

He had thought many times of that lamp. What it had come to mean. How something so simple had opened a place in his heart he had not known was still waiting for home.

And now tomorrow, that home would become his in a new and holy way.

Not possession.
Never that.

Belonging.

He bowed his head and prayed in the quiet.

Not for a perfect day. He was too seasoned to ask life for perfection.
Not even for the absence of trouble. Every blessing in this world is given beneath skies where weather may change.

He prayed for gratitude.
For steadiness.
For the grace to love Ginny well in all the years to come.
For humility.
For laughter.
For faith enough to keep the porch light burning, whatever the seasons ahead might bring.

When he lifted his head again, Mateo was standing in the doorway like a man who had emerged from the darkness itself.

Kenny looked over. "You make a habit of appearing like judgment."

Mateo came down one step. "And you make a habit of talking too much when you are thinking deeply."

Kenny smiled. "Fair."

The old ranch hand stepped out onto the porch and leaned against the post.

"You are ready?" he asked.

Kenny took a moment before answering.

"Yes," he said. "Not because I know everything. Not because I think marriage will be easy. But because I know her. And I know what I want to spend my life doing."

Mateo nodded once.

"That is enough."

There was another pause.

Then Kenny said, "You've watched over this place a long time."

Mateo looked toward the house. "Yes."

"And over her."

Another pause. "Yes."

Kenny turned the hat once in his hands. "Then I want you to know I do not take lightly what I'm being given."

The older man's face shifted almost imperceptibly.

"I know," he said.

And in those two words there was blessing enough.

From inside the bunkhouse came Jasper's muffled voice: "If y'all are having a fatherly porch moment, kindly do it quieter."

Mateo closed his eyes.

Kenny laughed softly.

"Goodnight, Mateo."

"Goodnight, Kenny."

Inside the house, Ginny had not yet extinguished her lamp.

Instead she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and stepped out onto the porch for one last look at the ranch before bed. The porch light burned warm beside the door. The night smelled faintly of dust, wood, and cooling earth. Far overhead, the stars stood bright and watchful in a sky so clear it made the world feel held.

She did not expect Kenny to be there.

He was not.

And yet after only a moment she sensed, rather than saw, someone in the yard near the gate.

Kenny had crossed over from the bunkhouse side but stopped well short of the porch, respecting the hour, the propriety of the night before the wedding, and perhaps also the tenderness of what might be said in such a moment.

Ginny's heart lifted at the sight of him.

Neither moved closer at first.

The distance between them was not cold. It was reverent.

“You ought to be sleeping,” she said softly.

He smiled in the dark. “I was about to say the same.”

She rested one hand on the porch post. “Then we are both failing admirably.”

A breeze stirred the hem of her shawl.

For a little while they simply looked at each other across the moonlit yard and the warm circle of the porch lamp.

There are moments when love deepens not by touch, but by the restraint that honors it.

This was one of those moments.

At last Kenny said, “I wanted to see the light once more before tomorrow.”

Ginny’s eyes softened.

“It will still be there tomorrow night,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered. “But tomorrow night it will mean something new.”

She felt the truth of that all through her.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It will.”

The silence that followed held no awkwardness. Only the fullness of all they had come through and all that now stood before them.

Then Ginny said, “Are you nervous?”

He thought about lying and chose not to.

“A little.”

“Good.”

He looked up, amused. “Good?”

“Yes. It means you understand the worth of what we’re doing.”

He nodded slowly. “Then are you nervous too?”

She smiled. “A little.”

“Good,” he said back to her.

That made her laugh softly in the night.

The sound crossed the yard like a blessing.

Kenny’s expression grew tender again. “Ginny?”

"Yes?"

"There is something I want to tell you tonight, before the vows and the people and all the rest of it."

She waited.

He held her gaze in the dim light, steady as ever.

"If tomorrow were stripped of every flower, every hymn, every guest, every planned thing but one, and all that remained was you standing before me willing to speak your promise, it would still be the finest day of my life."

The porch light flickered gently beside her, but the warmth she felt came from somewhere deeper than flame.

She answered after a moment, her voice low and full.

"And if all tomorrow held was you, Kenny—just you, your voice, your hands, your faithful heart before God—I would still call myself richly blessed."

Neither of them had expected tears that night.

Yet both felt them near.

Not sorrowful tears.

The kind that come when joy grows too deep to stay neatly contained.

Kenny did not step closer.

Neither did she.

They had no need to hurry toward tomorrow. It was already coming.

Instead Ginny placed her hand over her heart and said, "Sleep if you can, cowboy."

He smiled. "Only if you do the same."

"I'll try."

"So will I."

She began to turn back toward the door, then paused and looked over her shoulder.

"Kenny?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

The words crossed the quiet yard and settled in him like home.

His answer came at once, low and unwavering.

"And I love you."

Then she went inside.

The porch light remained burning a little while longer, just as it always had, warm and faithful against the dark. Kenny stood in the yard until her lamp inside had dimmed and gone out. Only then did he turn toward the bunkhouse.

That night, sleep came in fragments for them both.

Ginny dreamed once of church bells and sunlight through plain glass windows. Kenny woke before dawn and lay still in the half-dark, listening to the sounds of the ranch before morning fully began.

Yet neither weariness nor waiting could lessen the peace beneath it all.

For beyond the plans, beyond the nerves, beyond the tenderness of one last separate night, there remained the simple unshakable truth:

Tomorrow they would stand together.
Tomorrow they would vow before God and witnesses what love had already been teaching them day by day.
Tomorrow the porch light at Sundance would shine not for two separate lives being drawn close, but for one shared home beginning in covenant.

Outside, the stars wheeled on.
The desert kept its ancient watch.
And the night before forever passed gently over Sundance Ranch, full of promise and grace.

Chapter Twelve: *The Wedding at St. Luke's*

The wedding day dawned clear.

Before the sun rose fully over the Florida Mountains, the eastern sky had already begun to brighten in slow bands of silver, rose, and pale gold. A light breeze moved over Sundance Ranch, carrying with it the clean scent of dust, mesquite, and morning. It was the kind of day people later called blessed without sounding overly dramatic, because some days simply bear that quality from the start.

By the time the first real light touched the corrals, the ranch was awake.

Not with the usual workday rhythm, though the animals still had to be fed and watered and the practical needs of ranch life still attended to. No, this morning there was a current of expectancy in everything. Boots moved faster. Voices carried with unusual brightness. Doors opened and shut more often than necessary. Even Tommy, astonishingly, had risen without being called twice.

"It's wedding day," he announced to no one in particular and everyone at once, as though the sun itself might not know and require informing.

Jasper, pulling on his boots in the bunkhouse, muttered, "We noticed."

Tommy ignored him and kept going, propelled by a joy too great to be inconvenienced by sarcasm.

Inside the house, the atmosphere was different still.

Ginny's room held that holy sort of hush which settles over a woman's space on the morning of her wedding. The dress hung ready. The veil lay folded carefully nearby. Gloves, shoes, and the small details of the day rested in their places with almost ceremonial order. On the dresser, the ring Kenny had given her caught the morning light and seemed to shine with calm assurance.

Mrs. Alvarez arrived early, as she had promised, carrying a covered basket, a sewing kit no one would likely need but everyone felt better knowing she had, and the practical composure of a woman who could have managed a coronation with two pins and a firm tone of voice.

Miriam came not long after with flowers from St. Luke's already loosely gathered and smelling of fresh-cut stems and cool water. The bouquets were simple and lovely—white blooms, pale desert wildflowers, and touches of green that made the whole arrangement feel rooted in the land itself.

Mrs. Bellamy arrived last and breathless, as if she had run the entire way from town despite clearly not having done so.

"Am I too early?"

Mrs. Alvarez took one look at her hat, her basket, and her expression and said, "No. But you are yourself."

That was enough to settle everyone.

Ginny sat by the window while Mrs. Alvarez fastened the last hooks of her dress and Miriam adjusted the veil. She was not restless, exactly. But she was quiet in the deep inward way of a woman carrying much joy and reverence at once.

The dress suited her perfectly.

It was graceful without fuss, elegant without vanity. The lines of it honored her strength and softened it only where softness belonged. The veil was modest, just enough to lend the occasion its sacred beauty without turning her into someone she was not. The small silver cross still rested at her throat. Her ring remained on her hand, a promise already made, soon to be blessed before God and witnesses.

When at last she stood fully dressed, the room itself seemed to pause.

Mrs. Bellamy pressed one hand to her chest and promptly went misty-eyed.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, my dear."

Miriam smiled openly. Mrs. Alvarez only nodded once, firmly, but her eyes were warm.

Ginny looked at herself in the mirror.

She did not look younger. Life had earned too much honesty in her face for that. She looked more beautiful than youth could have managed. There was peace in her expression, depth in her eyes, and the kind of joy that does not skim along the surface but rises from the soul.

For one quiet moment she touched the veil lightly and whispered, almost to herself, "Thank You, Lord."

Across the yard, Kenny was meeting the morning in his own way.

Mateo and Eli had already seen to most of the chores they would not let the groom trouble himself with. Jasper, after complaining for twenty minutes about collars, had managed to look unexpectedly respectable. Tommy, having been scrubbed, brushed, and warned repeatedly against reckless behavior, was nearly vibrating with purpose.

Kenny stood in the bunkhouse before the small mirror nailed beside the window, fastening his clean white shirt and settling his black coat over it with hands steadier than he felt.

His best hat rested on the bunk.
His boots had been polished before dawn.
His tie—after a brief struggle—had been corrected by Eli in a gesture so quiet and brotherly that Kenny had not known whether to laugh or grow emotional.

Now, with everything in place, he looked at himself and hardly recognized the man in the mirror.

Not because the clothes were so fine.

Because today marked him.

He looked like a man standing at the threshold of answered prayer.

There came a knock at the open doorframe.

Mateo.

Kenny turned. "How do I look?"

Mateo studied him gravely. "Like a man who has no excuse to run."

Kenny laughed, the tension easing out of him for a moment. "That good?"

"Yes."

After a pause, Mateo stepped farther in and adjusted Kenny's tie by the smallest measure, though it needed no real fixing.

"You love her well," he said.

It was not a question.

Kenny's throat tightened unexpectedly. "I do."

Mateo nodded once. "Then stand there today and say the truth."

There was no finer advice.

By midmorning the wagons and riders began making their way toward St. Luke's. The churchyard filled with people from town, neighbors from nearby ranches, church folk in their Sunday best, children scrubbed nearly past recognition, and enough food baskets to suggest the reception might continue through Revelation if not properly managed.

The little church itself had been transformed, though not into anything unrecognizable. That was the beauty of it.

St. Luke's remained St. Luke's.

The whitewashed walls were bright in the sun. The blue trim had been wiped clean. Lanterns hung from hooks and rafters, though they would likely not be needed until later. Wildflowers and cotton branches adorned the altar and the window ledges. The pew ends bore simple ribbons and small bunches of blooms. Everything was graceful, heartfelt, and unpretentious.

It looked like a wedding born of faith and community, not display.

Inside, Reverend Pike stood at the front in his best black coat and with the solemn expression of a man who had performed many marriages and still regarded each one as holy ground. Mrs. Alvarez moved calmly through last-minute arrangements. Miriam organized music with the contained intensity of a battlefield strategist. Mrs. Bellamy, having temporarily exhausted her supply of suggestions, sat near the front with the satisfied posture of one expecting to enjoy herself thoroughly.

Kenny stood at the front beside Reverend Pike and tried very hard not to look as though his heart had risen into his throat.

Jasper stood behind him, cleaned up so well he seemed to have startled even himself. Eli stood on the other side, quiet and steady. Tommy had been entrusted with carrying a Bible to the front at the right moment and had sworn, under three separate warnings, not to drop it.

The church gradually settled.

Soft talking lowered.
Hats were removed.
Children were hushed.
The last rustle of movement fell away.

Then the opening hymn began.

Voices rose through the little church—some clear, some wavering, all sincere. Sunlight fell through the plain windows in warm bars across the pews. The notes lifted and filled the modest space with something larger than music alone.

Kenny sang because he needed to do something while waiting.

And then the doors at the back of the church opened.

Everything in him went still.

Ginny stood there on the threshold with Mrs. Alvarez beside her for that first breath of a moment, then, at Ginny's quiet insistence, alone.

That was how she had wanted it.

No elaborate procession.
No borrowed pageantry.
Just herself, entering freely into the house of God to meet the man she loved.

And she was radiant.

Not in the shallow way of a woman dressed up for attention.

In the deeper way of one whose heart is full and whose soul is at peace.

The veil softened her face without hiding it. The dress moved gently around her as she stepped forward. Her eyes found Kenny's almost at once, and whatever sounds remained in the church seemed to fall far away from them both.

Kenny had thought he was prepared to see her.

He was not.

The sight of her undid him so completely that for one dangerous second he feared he might disgrace himself by weeping in full public view. Jasper, standing behind him, shifted half an inch closer in what might have been readiness to catch him if needed.

Ginny walked down the aisle slowly, not from uncertainty but because the moment deserved unhurried steps. People turned to watch her pass, smiling through tears, whispering to one another with the soft joy of those privileged to witness something good and long-hoped-for.

Tommy, seeing her, forgot whatever burden of ceremonial dignity he had been carrying and simply grinned.

At last she came to the front.

Kenny stepped toward her without being told, as naturally as breath. He took her hands gently.

"You are beautiful," he whispered.

She smiled up at him, eyes bright beneath the veil. "So are you, in your own way."

That nearly made him laugh, which nearly made him lose all composure again.

Reverend Pike cleared his throat softly and the service began.

The opening prayer was simple and full of reverence. Scripture followed—passages chosen with care, speaking of steadfast love, covenant, companionship, and the grace of God in all seasons of life. Ruth was read. So was Ecclesiastes, with its ancient wisdom about times and seasons. Then from Corinthians came the familiar words on love, made new somehow in that little church because they were not abstract at all. They stood before the congregation in human form: Kenny and Ginny, older, steadier, weathered and faithful, choosing one another before God.

When it came time for the vows, the sanctuary seemed to gather itself into a deeper hush.

Reverend Pike looked first at Kenny.

"Will you have this woman to be your wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in joy and in sorrow, in health and in hardship, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?"

Kenny's answer came clear and unwavering.

"I will."

Then Reverend Pike turned to Ginny and asked the same.

Her voice, when she answered, was low but certain. "I will."

The vows themselves followed.

They spoke them facing one another, hands joined.

Kenny's voice trembled once, only once, when he promised to love and cherish her from that day forward. Ginny's tears slipped free when she vowed the same, though her words did not falter. The sight of them there—neither young nor naïve, both fully aware of what life can ask, and still speaking those promises without hesitation—moved the whole church more deeply than any grand wedding ever could have.

Then Tommy, to his eternal pride, brought forward the Bible and the ring with complete success and only one nearly visible gulp.

Kenny took Ginny's hand.

The ring he placed upon her finger this time was not new, yet it felt newly consecrated in that moment. He spoke the words Reverend Pike gave him, but the meaning in his face was entirely his own.

"With this ring, I thee wed…"

Then Ginny, with trembling fingers and such tenderness in her eyes that several pews nearly dissolved into tears again, placed the band upon Kenny's hand.

It fit.

Of course it did.

Two promises, now bound in both directions.

Reverend Pike raised his hands over them and pronounced the blessing, invoking the mercy and favor of God upon their marriage. The words seemed to settle over them like sunlight itself.

Then came the final sentence, the one every soul in that room had been waiting for though no one would have admitted such impatience in church:

"Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

A pause.

Then Reverend Pike smiled—actually smiled, which startled several people who had only ever seen him solemn.

"Kenny," he said, "you may kiss your bride."

The church held its breath.

Kenny lifted Ginny's veil with hands that were very nearly steady now and looked at her as if he would remember the sight all his life—which, God willing, he would.

Their kiss was tender and true.

Not long.
Not theatrical.
Not for display.

But full of joy, promise, and that strange sweetness which belongs only to a first kiss given as husband and wife.

The church erupted afterward—not wildly, but warmly. Laughter, applause hastily transformed into acceptable church enthusiasm, sniffles, handkerchiefs, and smiles spread in every direction.

Tommy actually clapped before Eli gently lowered his hands.
Mrs. Bellamy wept without shame.
Mrs. Talbot announced to no one and everyone that it was "the best one since '82."
Mateo bowed his head once, deeply satisfied.
Jasper looked as though he had been trying not to cry and was offended by the whole business.

Kenny and Ginny turned then to face the congregation together.

Husband and wife.

It was a simple thing and an enormous thing at once.

They walked back down the aisle side by side, hands joined, while the recessional hymn rose around them and sunlight flooded the church. People leaned out to smile, to bless, to throw words of joy after them. The little white church seemed almost too small to contain the grace of the day.

Outside, the churchyard blazed with afternoon light.

Someone had tied ribbons to the hitch rails.
Children scattered petals with more enthusiasm than aim.
Bellamy had found a way to look sentimental and self-important simultaneously.
Reverend Pike shook Kenny's hand with unusual vigor.
Mrs. Alvarez kissed Ginny on both cheeks and told her she looked like the answer to a prayer.
Tommy hovered near enough to be useful and far enough to avoid being sent on another errand.

Photographs were attempted, which in that time and place meant standing very still while various people gave contradictory instructions. Mrs. Bellamy insisted on one with the whole church family. Jasper complained he would blink and thereby ruin history. Mrs. Talbot sat when told to stand and stood when told to sit, yet somehow ended up near the center of everything.

Through it all, Kenny and Ginny moved as if in a kind of blessed dream—grounded, joyful, grateful, and just dazed enough by happiness to let the day carry them.

The fellowship meal followed beneath the cottonwoods and in the church hall both, since no gathering that size could be trusted entirely to weather or architecture. Tables groaned beneath platters of fried chicken, biscuits, roasted vegetables, beans, pies, cakes, preserves, and enough coffee to revive the saints and alarm the cautious.

Laughter rose in every direction.
Stories were told.
Blessings were offered.
Children darted between skirts and table legs.
Someone produced a fiddle.
Jasper, after eating enough to challenge decency, attempted to make a speech and was wisely shortened by Mrs. Alvarez before disaster could mature.

Kenny and Ginny sat at the center for part of the meal, receiving handshakes, embraces, and more counsel than any two people could carry into married life all at once.

"Never go to bed angry," one widow advised.

"Plant tomatoes separate from the squash," said another, as if this were equally scriptural.

"Pray together," Reverend Pike told them quietly, and that they both received with full seriousness.

At one point, while Kenny was drawn aside by Bellamy and two ranchers determined to discuss horses as if marriage were not happening at all, Ginny sat momentarily still beneath the trees and watched the people gathered around them.

St. Luke's.
Sundance hands.
Neighbors.
Friends.

Faith and labor and ordinary life had all come together in one glad community around her and Kenny.

Mrs. Alvarez settled briefly beside her.

"You are thinking," she said.

Ginny smiled. "Is it obvious?"

"To those with eyes."

Ginny looked toward Kenny, who at that moment was laughing at something Jasper had said while Tommy tried to insert himself into the conversation with solemn importance.

"I was just thanking God," she said.

Mrs. Alvarez followed her gaze and nodded. "That is the correct response."

Later, when the meal had wound down and the sunlight had begun its slow westering, it came time for departure.

Not for some long grand journey.

Only for the ride back to Sundance.

Yet even that felt ceremonial now.

The wagon had been made ready. The horses were fresh. Ribbons had somehow appeared on the rails despite Ginny having given no such instruction, which meant Mrs. Bellamy had once again exercised unsanctioned ministry.

People gathered to send them off.

Hats were waved.
Blessings called.
Tommy looked close to tears but would have denied it under torture.
Jasper shouted something about not forgetting the rest of the ranch once they became elegant, which no one considered likely.
Mateo simply took Kenny's hand once, then Ginny's, and in that wordless gesture conveyed more than speeches could have done.

When Kenny helped Ginny into the wagon, his hand at her waist was gentle and sure.

Then he climbed up beside her.

Husband and wife.

The phrase still moved through both of them like new music.

As the horses started forward and the wheels turned, the crowd gave a final cheer. Ginny looked back once at the church—at the whitewashed walls, the flowers, the people still waving beneath the cottonwoods.

Then she turned forward again.

The road to Sundance stretched golden before them in the late afternoon light.

For a while they rode in silence, not from awkwardness, but because some joys are too full for immediate speech.

At last Kenny said softly, "Mrs. Kenny of Sundance Ranch."

Ginny looked over at him, laughter already in her eyes.

"That sounds dangerously formal."

He smiled. "Then how shall I say it?"

She considered, then reached over and laid her hand lightly over his on the reins.

"You may begin," she said, "with Ginny."

His whole face warmed.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. Then, after half a beat: "Ginny."

The way he spoke her name now—as husband, as beloved, as companion for life—made her heart answer like a bell.

The sun sank lower.

The ranch would be waiting.
The porch light would burn.
And ahead of them lay not only evening, but the beginning of all the evenings yet to come.

By the time Sundance Ranch came into view in the last gold of day, both of them felt the day's joy settling into something deeper and steadier still.

The wedding at St. Luke's was over.

The vows had been spoken.
The church had rejoiced.
The people had blessed them.

Now the real life of love would begin.

And it would begin, as so much at Sundance had begun, beneath the faithful glow of home.

Chapter Thirteen: *The First Night at Sundance*

By the time the wagon rolled back into Sundance Ranch, the last of the sunset had softened into amber and rose along the western horizon.

The ranch stood waiting in that tender light as though it had known all day what it was waiting for. The barn had darkened into silhouette. The corrals lay quiet. The windmill turned slow against the deepening sky. And on the porch, glowing warmly against the dusk, the lamp was already burning.

Ginny saw it first.

Her fingers tightened lightly over Kenny's where they rested on the wagon seat. "The porch light."

Kenny followed her gaze and felt that familiar stirring rise in him again—that sense of welcome, of belonging, of having been remembered before he even crossed the threshold. Only now it was fuller than it had ever been before.

"It's burning for us now," she said.

He turned and looked at her—his wife in the fading light, her wedding band bright against her hand, her face still touched by the joy of the day.

"Yes," he said softly. "For us."

They rode the last few yards in quiet, neither hurrying the moment. The stillness between them was no longer the stillness of waiting. It was the stillness of arrival.

Inside the house, the evening had been prepared with gentle kindness. A covered plate sat on the kitchen table. Fresh coffee had been left warming. A note in Mrs. Alvarez's hand rested beside it, brief and firm enough to make them both smile:

No chores tonight. No washing dishes. No behaving sensibly until morning.

Ginny laughed first, low and tired and happy, and Kenny came up behind her as she stood at the table and slipped his arms around her waist. He kissed the place just below her ear.

"She understands more than she says," he murmured.

Ginny leaned back against him. "That has always been her strength."

He held her there a moment longer, breathing in the faint scent of her hair, flowers, and the clean evening air still clinging to her from the ride home. The shape of her in his arms felt at once newly astonishing and completely right.

Wife.

The word moved through him again, not as possession, but as wonder.

She turned in his arms slowly until she faced him, and for a moment they only looked at one another in the warm lamplight of the kitchen. No church now. No witnesses. No one calling for another photograph or another piece of cake or one more blessing before they left.

Just the two of them.
At home.
Married.

Ginny lifted her hand and touched his cheek.

"What is it?" she asked, though she could already see it in his face.

Kenny covered her hand with his own. "I keep having the same thought."

"Which is?"

"That I am here. In this house. With you. And I don't have to leave at the end of the evening."

Something in her expression softened even more.

"No," she said. "You don't."

He bent and kissed her then, and the kiss was different from every other they had shared. Not sweeter, perhaps, but deeper. Slower. It carried the whole day inside it—the vows, the church, the ride home, the porch light, the truth of what had been spoken before God. Ginny answered him with no hesitation at all, her hands sliding up around his shoulders, her whole heart meeting his in the quiet of the room.

When they parted, both of them were smiling, though a little breathlessly.

"Well," Ginny whispered, her forehead resting lightly against his chest, "that was not exactly a kitchen kiss."

Kenny laughed softly and kissed her hair. "No, ma'am. It surely wasn't."

They ate only a little. Enough to satisfy the body, not the heart. Coffee was poured and mostly forgotten. More than once one of them looked at the other and smiled for no reason except that the looking itself had become a pleasure too deep to resist.

At last the house grew quieter still. Outside, the ranch had settled into evening. The porch light burned in its warm little circle beyond the window. The room seemed to draw inward around them, intimate and sheltering.

Ginny stood first.

Kenny rose with her.

For a moment neither moved. The nearness between them seemed to hold its own breath, not from uncertainty, but from reverence. This too mattered. Not only that they desired one another, though

they did. Not only that the day had led naturally here, though it had. But that what was about to pass between them would be part of the vow itself—tender, holy, and complete.

Ginny's voice, when she spoke, was low and honest.

"I want tonight to be beautiful."

Kenny stepped closer, his face full of gentleness. "It will be."

"I don't want to feel rushed."

"You won't."

She held his gaze. "And I don't want awkwardness to spoil what ought to be a blessing."

That made his smile deepen.

"Then we'll forgive whatever awkwardness visits," he said, "and let the blessing stay."

She laughed softly, and the little sound eased them both.

He touched her face with quiet tenderness. "Ginny, you've never needed to fear me."

"I know."

"And tonight you needn't fear a single moment of this. We have all the time the Lord gives us."

That, more than anything, brought peace to her.

She took his hand then and led him toward the bedroom.

The room had been prepared simply and beautifully. Fresh linens. A lamp turned low. Her dress folded over the chair from where it had been brought in. Flowers from the church stood in a small vase on the washstand, their pale petals catching the low golden light. Through the open window came cool night air and the scent of clean earth.

The room did not feel staged.
It felt blessed.

They stood beside the bed in silence for a long moment, taking in the reality of it.

Then Kenny reached up to her veil.

He removed it slowly, carefully, his fingers brushing her hair as he lifted it away. When he laid it aside and looked back at her, there was open admiration in his face and something even deeper than that—love made tender by wonder.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

Ginny's lips parted slightly at the way he said it, not as courtesy, not as habit, but as a man speaking what he felt with all his heart.

Her hands moved to his coat. She slipped it from his shoulders and hung it carefully over the chair, then turned back to him and laid both palms against his chest.

"So are you," she answered.

He smiled faintly. "That still surprises me."

"It shouldn't."

Her fingers moved to his tie and began loosening it. He stood still for her, watching her face, the concentration and tenderness in it, the way her lashes lowered now and then when she felt his gaze on her. Once the tie was gone, she undid the first buttons of his shirt and spread her hand lightly over the warmth beneath.

The touch made his breath deepen.

Ginny looked up, and something quiet and certain passed between them. No longer only affection. No longer only anticipation. This was the deep, living closeness of husband and wife, freely given and fully welcomed.

Kenny's hands moved to the back of her dress. He found the hooks and buttons with careful fingers, unfastening them one by one. Every touch carried patience. Every movement honored her trust.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Ginny nodded. "Yes."

His mouth touched her temple, then the curve below her ear. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I won't want you to."

The last of the fastenings came free.

He slipped the dress slowly from her shoulders, pausing more than once simply to look at her, to let the moment settle into memory. She did not turn away from him. Whatever shyness remained in her was not fear, but the natural vulnerability of being fully seen by the one person she most wanted to receive her with love.

And he did.

He touched her with the same tenderness that had marked every step of their journey, only now there was no need for restraint beyond kindness itself. Ginny answered him with growing warmth, her hands moving over him with equal care, helping him out of the last of his wedding clothes, smiling once when his sleeve caught and made them both laugh softly in the lamplight.

That laughter helped. It made the room feel not less sacred, but more human, more theirs.

When at last they stood together with nothing left between them but lamplight, breath, and love, the room fell very still.

Kenny reached for her face with both hands and kissed her again, deeply this time. Ginny answered with equal feeling, her fingers sliding into his hair, her whole heart and body leaning into him with unmistakable trust.

He gathered her close with a low sound that was almost wonder, and she felt the full truth of his love in the strength and gentleness of his embrace.

He lowered her carefully onto the bed and came over her, pausing long enough to search her face once more.

"Ginny."

"Yes."

"I love you."

She drew him down to her. "I know."

What passed between them after that belonged wholly to husband and wife—tender, intimate, and deeply joined. There were pauses for kisses, for whispered words, for moments when one or the other simply looked in wonder at the nearness and reality of it. There were soft laughs, quiet reassurances, and the growing ease that comes when love and trust guide the heart more surely than fear ever could.

Their marriage was consummated that night not in haste, nor with any sense of performance, but with patience, warmth, and reverence. What they had promised before God at St. Luke's was now sealed in the privacy of their home, in the tenderness of shared love, and in the sacred joy of giving themselves fully to one another.

Later, when the deeper urgency of the moment had given way to stillness, they lay together in the dim lamplight, breath slowly easing, the sheets cool around them and the night close and sheltering beyond the window.

Ginny rested against him with her head on his shoulder, one hand over his heart.

Kenny held her as though no place on earth could have been more natural.

For a long time neither spoke.

Then Ginny said softly, "I am very glad I married you."

The words were simple, and because of that they went straight into him.

He kissed her hair. "I am very glad you did too."

She smiled against his skin.

After a little while he said, "I hope tonight was everything it ought to have been."

She lifted her head and looked at him, her hair loosened, her face luminous with the afterglow of joy and peace.

"It was," she whispered. "And more."

That answer pleased him so deeply he could only hold her closer.

She touched his face again, tracing the lines there with the slow affection of a wife already learning the comfort of small, intimate gestures.

"Kenny?"

"Yes?"

"When you first rode into Sundance, did you have any notion this would be waiting for you?"

He smiled in the dim light. "Not even the smallest."

"Neither did I."

"And yet here we are."

"Yes," she whispered. "Here we are."

Outside, the porch light still burned for a while longer, though neither of them could see it from where they lay. It shone over the steps, over the yard, over the quiet ranch where every fence and board and horse and shadow had become witness to a love brought all the way home.

Inside, the lamp by the bed was turned lower still.

Kenny kissed her once more, gently now, not with the first intensity of the night but with the softer depth that follows when passion has settled into peace. Ginny nestled closer, her body relaxed against his, entirely at rest in his arms.

There is a kind of intimacy beyond desire.

Not less than it.
Beyond it.

The intimacy of staying.
Of breathing together in the dark.
Of knowing that nothing remains to be proved, won, or feared.

That was the gift of their first night at Sundance.

Not merely that they had come together as husband and wife, though they had.
Not merely that the waiting had ended, though it had.

But that love, at last, had somewhere to rest.

In the deep hours of the night, when the last lamp had gone out and only moonlight remained, Kenny woke once and found Ginny sleeping with one hand still resting lightly against him, as if even in dreams she knew where home was now. He looked at her for a long while in the silver dark, humbled afresh by the mercy of it.

Then he kissed her forehead very gently and settled back beside her.

Morning would come soon enough.
There would be coffee again.
Sunrise over the ranch.
The beginning of ordinary married life with all its chores and blessings and weather.

But not yet.

For now there was only the quiet room, the woman he loved asleep in his arms, and the holy peace of a wedding night fully given to tenderness, trust, and home.

And over Sundance Ranch, beneath stars slowly fading toward dawn, the first night of forever passed in grace.

Chapter Fourteen: *Morning Comes to Sundance*

Morning came softly to Sundance Ranch.

Before the sun had fully lifted itself over the Florida Mountains, the eastern sky had already turned from deep blue to silver, then to the pale rose that always seemed to belong especially to desert dawn. Cool air drifted through the open bedroom window. Somewhere in the yard below, a horse stamped lightly in the corral. Farther off, a rooster made his usual overconfident announcement to creation.

Inside the bedroom, the light came gently.

It touched the quilt at the foot of the bed, the chair where Ginny's dress had been folded the night before, the flowers on the washstand, and at last the bed itself—where Kenny and Ginny still lay wrapped in the warmth and peace of their first night as husband and wife.

Ginny woke first.

She did not move right away.

For a few quiet moments she simply lay still in the softness of the morning and let herself feel where she was. Kenny's arm was draped around her. His breathing was slow and even against her shoulder. One of her hands rested against his chest beneath the sheet, and the steady rise and fall of it beneath her palm stirred something deep and tender in her all over again.

Married.

The word did not startle her now.
It settled.

She turned her head slightly and looked at him.

In sleep, Kenny's face had lost some of its weathered gravity. Not all of it—life had written too much there to vanish entirely—but enough that he looked younger in rest, softer around the mouth, gentler about the eyes. A lock of hair had fallen loose across his forehead. She smiled to see it.

He looked peaceful.

That alone moved her more than she could have said.

She had seen him travel-worn, thoughtful, laughing, working, praying, kissing her beneath moonlight, standing at the altar waiting for her, and lying awake in the darkness after their wedding night with her in his arms. But this—this quiet unguardedness of morning—felt intimate in a different way.

She lifted her hand and brushed the loose strand of hair back from his forehead.

Kenny stirred almost at once.

His eyes opened slowly, still heavy with sleep. For the briefest moment he looked like a man coming back from far away. Then his gaze found hers, and the whole of his face changed.

"Morning," he said, his voice rough and low.

Ginny smiled. "Morning."

He looked at her for a long, quiet second, as if confirming she was still there and not some blessing he had dreamed too vividly in the night.

"Well," he murmured.

She laughed softly. "You said that last night."

"Yes," he said, drawing her a little closer beneath the sheets. "And I'm saying it again."

The warmth of him, the sleepy tenderness in his voice, the unmistakable affection already rising in his face—it all touched her with a sweetness so full it nearly ached.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He let his gaze travel over her face, her loosened hair, the morning light resting on her shoulders above the sheet.

"That I have woken up in the right place."

Her expression softened.

Kenny's hand moved slowly up her back, not urgently now, just enough to keep her close. "And with the right woman."

She leaned in and kissed him, gently at first, the kind of kiss meant to greet rather than consume. But even that morning kiss carried a deeper warmth now, the memory of the night behind it and the knowledge that there would be no parting from one another at dawn.

When they drew apart, Kenny's forehead rested lightly against hers.

"I'm still not used to this," he said.

"To what?"

"To opening my eyes and finding my wife looking at me like I'm welcome."

Ginny's eyes brightened.

"You are welcome," she said. "Though if you keep saying things like that before coffee, I may become impossible."

He smiled. "I thought marriage might do that anyway."

She touched his cheek. "Marriage seems to be improving your courage."

"It's improving a great many things."

That made her laugh again, low and warm, and he kissed her once more simply because he could.

For a while they stayed as they were, half talking, half smiling, letting the morning come to them without haste. The light grew stronger. Outside, the ranch slowly awakened. A gate creaked. Hooves sounded in the yard. Somewhere near the house, a bucket was set down with controlled force—which likely meant Mateo was already at work and exercising mercy by not rattling the whole world awake.

Ginny lifted her head slightly. "They'll all be up."

"They are already up."

"You know what I mean."

Kenny sighed with exaggerated regret and settled his cheek against her hair. "I was beginning to think the Lord had arranged for the ranch to run itself today."

"He did not."

"Pity."

She smiled against his chest. "You sound spoiled."

"I am. It happened overnight."

At that she raised herself on one elbow and looked down at him with amused severity. The sheet slipped slightly, revealing the bare curve of her shoulder, and Kenny's eyes dropped there before returning to hers.

"You are not helping your cause," she said.

He looked entirely unrepentant. "I'm a married man. I have a cause?"

"You have several. First among them: behaving with some dignity."

He considered this. "I can begin after another kiss."

She shook her head, but she bent and gave it to him anyway.

The second kiss was slower.
The third, when it came, was not entirely innocent.

By the time Ginny drew back again, there was color in her face and a familiar warmth in both of them that had little to do with the morning air. Kenny's hand lingered at her waist beneath the sheet, his thumb moving in a way that made her draw in a breath.

"Kenny," she murmured.

"Yes, love."

"That is not helping your cause either."

"Then I shall abandon the cause entirely."

She laughed, but softly now, because she could feel how close delight and desire still lived in this new marriage. It pleased her. More than pleased her—it steadied something tender and joyful in her to know that what they had shared the night before had not been some one-time blaze of wedding-night passion, but the beginning of something living and natural between them.

Still, there was a ranch below, and a day waiting.

With visible reluctance, they finally rose.

The room held the sweet disarray of two people who had loved each other well and slept close afterward. The low lamp had gone out in the night. The flowers on the washstand were beginning to open a little more in the growing light. Ginny found her robe and slipped it on. Kenny reached for his trousers and shirt, and for a moment they moved around one another in that shy-not-shy way newly married people sometimes do—at once entirely familiar after one night and still charmed by each fresh glimpse.

Ginny caught him watching her as she tied the robe sash.

"What?"

He gave a half-smile. "Nothing."

"That is not true."

"No," he admitted. "It isn't."

She crossed to him and began fastening the buttons of his shirt, her fingers slow and affectionate.

"You are staring at your wife."

"I've heard that's allowed."

"In moderation."

"I have no moderation left."

She looked up at him then, close enough to feel the warmth of his skin and the steadiness of his breathing.

"That," she said quietly, "is not entirely a complaint."

His expression changed at once—deepening, softening, filling with a tenderness that made her glad all over again she had married this man.

He bent and kissed her forehead.

"Well," he said, "there's hope for us yet."

By the time they came into the kitchen, the house had fully crossed into morning. Sunlight fell over the table in broad golden bars. The Bible still lay open where it often rested. The coffee pot, left ready the night before, stood waiting to be warmed. The ordinary beauty of the room—the chairs, the stove, the shelves Ginny had arranged with care long before Kenny's arrival—felt dearer than ever now because it was no longer hers alone.

Kenny crossed first to the stove. "Coffee."

Ginny smiled. "Now you sound truly married."

"I am discovering the responsibilities of the office."

She watched him there in the morning light, moving easily in the kitchen as though he had a place in it already. Not taking over. Not intruding. Belonging. The sight touched her unexpectedly.

"What is it?" he asked without turning around. "You've gone quiet."

She came near and rested a hand lightly between his shoulders for a moment. "Just looking at you in my kitchen."

He glanced over one shoulder. "Your kitchen?"

She considered. "Our kitchen."

He turned then, coffee forgotten for the moment, and there was something in his face so openly moved that she felt tears press briefly at the corners of her eyes.

"Our kitchen," he repeated softly.

She nodded.

He reached for her and drew her in against him, robe and shirt and morning sunlight and all. They stood there in the middle of the kitchen holding each other while the coffee heated and the ranch sounds drifted faintly through the open window.

At last he said into her hair, "That may be the finest sentence I've ever heard."

"You are still very susceptible to sentiment before breakfast."

"And after, I expect."

The coffee was soon poured. Ginny cut bread and warmed what remained of the food left from the night before. Kenny set the table, though he put the spoons in the wrong place and had to be corrected with only moderate dignity. It all felt absurdly natural for a first morning—a thing they had somehow been moving toward long before they knew it.

They had just begun to eat when there came a knock at the back door.

Not a hesitant knock.
Not a polite little tap.

A Tommy knock.

Ginny closed her eyes briefly. Kenny bit back a smile.

Before either of them could answer, Tommy's voice came through the door, pitched low and urgent in the manner of someone trying and failing to sound discreet.

"Miss Gin—" A pause. "Mrs. Kenny?" Another pause. "I mean—uh—can I come in?"

Kenny looked at Ginny over the rim of his coffee cup.

"This," he murmured, "ought to be good."

Ginny set her cup down. "Come in, Tommy."

The door opened a crack, then wider. Tommy stepped in, scrubbed, earnest, and so desperately curious that it was a wonder he had not burst from it on the porch. He took one look at the two of them at the breakfast table, sitting close and looking very much at home together, and broke into a grin so broad it almost rearranged his face.

"Well," he said.

Kenny choked lightly on his coffee.

Ginny stared. "Not you too."

Tommy, undeterred, straightened with the solemnity of a self-appointed official. "I just come to say congratulations on bein' married proper overnight."

There was a beat of stunned silence.

Then Kenny laughed so hard he had to set his cup down.

Ginny pressed her lips together, trying not to, and failed almost immediately.

Tommy, encouraged, continued. "Also, Mateo says the south gate's loose again, and Jasper says if marriage means no chores then he intends to get married by noon."

"That," Kenny said, still laughing, "is the worst theological conclusion reached this week."

Tommy beamed. "So should I tell 'em you're both alive and comin' out soon?"

Ginny looked heavenward for patience. "Yes, Tommy. You may tell them that."

He nodded with grave satisfaction, then leaned forward a little. "Can I call you Mrs. Kenny now?"

Kenny, hearing this, wisely lowered his eyes to his plate.

Ginny fixed Tommy with a look that ought to have warned him away from all dangerous ground forever. "You may call me Miss Ginny until the Lord returns."

"Yes'm," he said happily, apparently delighted rather than discouraged.

Then he vanished through the door as abruptly as he had come, leaving laughter in his wake.

When the door closed again, Kenny leaned back in his chair and rubbed a hand over his mouth.

"I believe," he said, "that boy just announced our survival to the ranch."

Ginny shook her head, smiling helplessly. "He did."

"Think Mateo sent him on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Think Jasper helped?"

"Absolutely."

That set them both laughing again, the kind of shared laughter that deepens affection even more than kisses sometimes do.

After breakfast they stepped out together onto the porch.

The sun was well above the horizon now, lighting the whole ranch in clear morning gold. The porch lamp had been extinguished, but its warmth seemed somehow still present in the boards, the rail, the very air itself. The day smelled of dust, horses, coffee, and beginning.

Below in the yard, Mateo was adjusting the bridle on a horse that did not need adjusting but appreciated competence. Eli was carrying feed toward the barn. Jasper, leaning against a post with counterfeit laziness, looked up and called, "Well, the newlyweds appear among the living."

Tommy, from somewhere near the pump, shouted, "I told you they would!"

Ginny lifted her chin. "You all seem remarkably interested in our morning."

Mateo did not look up. "Only in whether the gate gets fixed."

Kenny stepped beside her, close enough that his shoulder brushed hers.

"I'll get to it," he called back.

Jasper grinned. "There speaks a married man."

Eli, not lifting his gaze from the feed sack, said quietly, "Morning, Mrs. Ginny. Kenny."

It was the simplest greeting of all, and perhaps the kindest.

"Morning," they both answered.

For a few moments they stood there together on the porch, looking out over Sundance Ranch in the full light of their first day as husband and wife.

Nothing had changed.
Everything had changed.

There were fences to mend.
Animals to tend.
Meals to cook.
Accounts to keep.
There would be weather and weariness and misunderstandings and long stretches of ordinary life, just as there always are.

But now all of that would be shared.

Kenny slipped his hand into Ginny's.

No show in it.
No need.

Just the simple truth of joined lives.

She looked up at him.

"What are you thinking now?" she asked.

He looked out over the yard, the barn, the wide country beyond, and then back at her.

"That morning has come to Sundance," he said. "And I wouldn't change a single thing about it."

Ginny's fingers closed a little more tightly around his.

"Nor would I."

The wind moved softly over the open land.
The ranch woke fully into day.
And there on the porch of the home they now shared, under a wide New Mexico sky bright with promise, their married life began in earnest.

Chapter Fifteen: *Trouble on the Horizon*

Married life at Sundance Ranch did not settle into ease so much as into rhythm.

That was enough.

The mornings came with coffee, sunlight, and chores. The evenings came with porch light, tired laughter, and the quiet comfort of knowing where the day would end. Kenny took naturally to the life beside Ginny, not as a man trying to prove himself anymore, but as one who had already committed himself fully and now meant to live that commitment in plain, faithful ways.

He fixed what needed fixing.
He rose early.
He prayed with her before breakfast more often than not.
He laughed more than he had in years.
And when he looked at her across the kitchen table or in the yard or by lamplight at night, there was still that same grateful wonder in his face, though now it had settled into something steady and abiding.

Ginny, for her part, found marriage did not diminish her independence. It deepened her peace. She was no less strong than before, no less capable, no less the heart of Sundance Ranch. But now she carried the burdens of the place with someone beside her who understood both the work and the soul beneath it.

That, she discovered, was a rare mercy.

For nearly three weeks after the wedding, life moved in that blessed way people are tempted to call calm. But anyone who had lived long on the land knew calm was not a promise. It was a season.

The first sign came on a Tuesday afternoon.

The air had felt wrong since noon.

Not storm-heavy exactly. Not yet. But strained, as if the sky were holding itself too tightly. The light had taken on a pale hard cast. Birds flew lower than usual. Even the horses were restless in the nearer pasture, lifting their heads more often and turning their ears toward the west.

Ginny stood at the porch rail with one hand shading her eyes, looking toward the horizon.

Kenny came up beside her carrying a coil of rope.

"You see it too."

She nodded.

Far off beyond the ridge, the western sky had darkened—not with rain clouds, but with a broad rising wall of dust.

Not a simple wind.
Not an ordinary blow.

A sandstorm.

Kenny set the rope down. "How bad do you think?"

Ginny did not answer immediately. She had seen storms before, enough to know the difference between inconvenience and threat.

"Bad enough," she said at last, "if it comes full."

By the time Mateo and Eli rode in from the south line, the wall of dust had grown taller, wider, moving with the frightening steadiness of something that meant to take the land by force. The wind had already begun to shift in hard, uneven gusts.

Mateo dismounted fast. "West gate's secure. North line's holding for now."

"For now," Ginny repeated.

Tommy came running from the barn, hair already whipped loose by the rising wind. "You think it'll hit tonight?"

"Yes," said Kenny.

That one word changed the whole ranch.

Whatever softness the day had held vanished at once. Sundance moved into storm work.

Orders were given sharply and cleanly.

Horses into the lower barn.
Loose tools secured.
Water barrels checked.
Windows shuttered.
Extra lanterns filled and set ready.
Chickens closed in tight.
Wagons turned and covered.
Any stock too far out brought in as near as could be managed before the worst of the wind hit.

No one wasted time asking foolish questions. Not even Tommy.

Kenny and Eli rode out to bring in the far cattle from the west side of the property while Mateo and Jasper reinforced the barn doors with cross-bracing. Ginny moved through the yard like a commander at the center of battle—calm, quick, seeing everything. She tied down what could blow loose, directed Tommy through a series of tasks only just beyond his current competence, and made three decisions at once whenever circumstances demanded it.

Marriage had not changed that in her.

Kenny loved her for it all the more.

By late afternoon the sky had gone a strange bruised color. The wind rose harder, driving grit into every crease of wood and skin. Dust ran ahead of the main storm now in bitter little streams that stung the eyes and coated the teeth.

Kenny and Eli came in with the last of the cattle they could safely push, both horses lathered and snorting.

"More still beyond the draw," Eli called over the wind. "Couldn't get to them without losing the horses."

Ginny nodded once. "Then we've done what we can."

That was the hardest truth of ranch life. Sometimes you worked until wisdom told you to stop, not because all was safe, but because more effort would cost more than it could save.

The first full blast hit just before sundown.

It came with a sound like the world itself being scraped raw.

Dust slammed against the house, barn, and outbuildings in a sweeping roar. The wind howled around corners and under eaves. Visibility dropped almost at once. The porch disappeared behind a moving wall of grit and darkness. The whole ranch seemed to crouch under the assault.

Inside the house, the lamps had been lit though it was not yet full dark. Ginny stood by the front window trying to see through the shutter gap. Kenny came in from the back after helping Mateo latch the final barn door.

"It's worse than I thought," he said.

She turned toward him, her face marked with dust and strain. "The north side worries me."

"The fence?"

"The old shed."

He knew at once what she meant. The small equipment shed on the north side had needed a better roof brace for months. It had held through lesser winds, but only barely.

As if in answer, a heavy crash sounded somewhere outside, muffled by the storm but unmistakable.

Tommy jumped from his chair by the stove. "What was that?"

No one answered right away.

Then Jasper, from the back room, called, "That sounded expensive."

Kenny met Ginny's eyes.

"The shed," they said at once.

He was already reaching for his coat.

Ginny stepped toward him. “No.”

“It could take the fence if it goes.”

“And the storm could take you.”

“I’ll tie off and stay close.”

“Close is still outside.”

The wind hammered the house again, hard enough to rattle the shutters.

Kenny moved nearer, lowering his voice though the storm made intimacy almost impossible.

“If that shed tears loose and hits the north line, we’ll lose stock in the dark and this wind. You know that.”

Her jaw tightened. She did know it.

That did not make it easier.

“I’m going with you,” she said.

“No.”

“You don’t get to say no to me on my own ranch.”

He looked at her with the force of a husband trying very hard not to become a tyrant under the guise of protection.

“I can say no to you risking yourself for what I can reach alone.”

“And I can say no to letting my husband walk into that storm without me.”

The room went very quiet except for the violence outside.

Mateo, who had come in through the kitchen door half a second before the argument turned serious, looked from one to the other and said flatly, “You are both right. Which is inconvenient.”

Even through fear, Ginny almost laughed.

Kenny blew out a breath. “Mateo—”

“I will go,” Mateo said.

“No,” Ginny and Kenny answered together.

Tommy, wide-eyed and pale now, gripped the back of the chair. “Somebody shouldn’t go alone.”

Kenny looked at him. “That’s true.”

Then he turned back to Ginny.

The decision had to be made quickly, and both knew it.

"At least let me be the one in the yard when you come out," she said. "You'll need someone at the rope."

He hated that it made sense.

She saw it in his face and pressed the advantage with calm steadiness. "I won't go farther than the porch post. I'll anchor you there. If it's too much, I haul you back whether you like it or not."

Jasper muttered, "Marriage is certainly an education."

No one paid him any attention.

At last Kenny nodded once. "Porch only."

"Porch only," she agreed.

A thick rope was looped around Kenny's waist and anchored inside at the door frame, then re-looped to Ginny's hands at the threshold. Mateo braced behind her. Eli stood ready with another lantern and line. The moment the door opened, wind and grit burst inward like an animal.

Kenny ducked his head and went out into it.

From the porch, Ginny could barely see him at all—only a shifting dark shape against darker air, moving by instinct toward where the shed stood. The wind tore at his coat. Dust needled her face and hands. She wrapped the line twice around the post and fed it out inch by inch, every muscle taut.

"Can you see him?" Tommy shouted from inside.

"No!" Jasper shouted back. "That's the nature of a sandstorm!"

"Quiet," Mateo snapped.

A shape loomed through the grit—the shed roof, half-lifted already, banging against its frame like a loose jaw. Kenny reached it just as another gust hit. Even from the porch Ginny could see the danger in the motion of it. If the structure tore free, it could strike him, the fence, or both.

He fought it with rope and raw strength, pulling the loosened beam down far enough to lash it to the foundation post. Once. Twice. The wind nearly threw him sideways.

Ginny tightened the line hard.

"Kenny!"

He raised one arm in a brief signal—still there, still working.

Then the storm changed.

Not in sound.
In violence.

A harder gust came, lower and more vicious than the others, and something large broke loose somewhere beyond the house. A board? A section of roofing? Whatever it was struck near the porch in a burst of noise and splintering wood that made Tommy shout and Eli lunge forward.

The rope in Ginny's hands jerked so violently it burned her palms through the grit.

"Kenny!"

This time there was no answering signal.

She hauled with all her strength.

Mateo seized the line beside her. Eli joined. Inch by inch they dragged against the storm until at last a body hit the porch boards hard and rolled toward the door.

Kenny.

Ginny dropped to her knees beside him before the door was fully slammed shut again. Dust covered him almost gray. One sleeve was torn. Blood ran from a cut near his temple, and for one terrible second he did not move.

Her heart seemed to stop in her chest.

"Kenny."

Nothing.

She touched his face with shaking hands. "Kenny."

Then he coughed—a brutal, blessed sound—and opened his eyes.

Ginny made a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh and bent over him with both hands on his face.

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

His voice, when it came, was raw and faintly dazed. "I'll make a note."

Mateo looked out through the shutter crack and nodded once. "Shed's holding."

Jasper let out a breath. "Excellent. We nearly killed the groom, but the shed is preserved."

Even Ginny, still trembling, almost smiled through the tears in her eyes.

They got Kenny up and inside fully, settled him at the kitchen table, cleaned the cut, checked his ribs, and discovered by the grace of God and thick bone that he had no break worse than bruising. The blow had stunned him, that was all. Stunned him badly enough to frighten them, but not take him.

That night the storm raged for hours.

No one slept much.

Tommy dozed by the stove and woke at every hard slam of wind. Jasper paced and gave periodic gloomy commentary until Mrs. Alvarez, had she been there, would have struck him with a spoon. Mateo sat near the door like a stone saint of endurance. Eli checked the barn twice despite the danger and came back carrying half the outside world in his coat.

Through it all, Ginny stayed beside Kenny.

Not hovering.
Not fussing beyond reason.

But near.

When he drank water, she held the cup.
When the pain in his ribs sharpened as he shifted, her hand went to his shoulder without thought.
When the worst of the storm finally began to pass toward midnight, she sat with him on the settee beneath a blanket and did not let go of his hand.

At one point, when the others had grown quieter and the house had settled into that exhausted stillness which follows fear, Kenny turned to her and said very softly, "I'm sorry."

She looked at him as though the word itself offended her.

"For what?"

"For scaring you."

The lamp beside them cast warm low light across her face. Her eyes were tired, reddened with dust and strain, and more beautiful to him in that moment than they had been even at the altar.

"You did scare me," she said. "Very badly."

"I know."

She drew a breath and steadied it. "But I am not angry that you went."

"No?"

"No." Her fingers tightened around his. "I am angry that this world still contains wind enough to try and take from me what I love."

That went through him so deeply he could not answer at once.

At last he raised her hand and pressed it against his mouth. "I'm still here."

"Yes," she whispered. "You are."

Morning showed the damage.

The north shed had held, but only just. Two fence sections were down. A water barrel had rolled half a mile into the brush. One shutter hung broken. The chicken coop roof needed repair, and the whole ranch wore a coat of dust thick enough to rename creation.

But Sundance still stood.

And so did Kenny.

Word spread fast, as word always does after weather.

By noon neighbors had come by to help reset fence posts and right what the wind had thrown crooked. Bellamy arrived with three men and twice as many stories about storms he had supposedly survived. Mrs. Alvarez came with bread, broth, and the expression of one prepared to take command if anyone resisted common sense. Reverend Pike rode out to pray over the place and stayed to carry lumber, which impressed everyone.

Kenny, against Ginny's wishes and under her supervision, worked lightly from the porch and then the yard, sore but able. Every time she caught sight of the bruise darkening near his temple or the stiffness in his movement, something clenched again in her chest.

By late afternoon the worst had been mended.

Not perfectly.
Enough.

That evening, as the sky cleared into a washed clean blue and gold, Kenny found Ginny standing alone by the north line where the repaired shed now stood quiet and ordinary, as if it had not nearly become the instrument of widowhood.

He came beside her slowly.

She did not look at him right away. "You should be sitting down."

"I've sat enough."

The wind now was gentle, almost ashamed of itself.

After a long moment she said, "When they pulled you back to the porch and you didn't answer me…" Her voice faltered once, then steadied again. "I have known fear before. But not like that."

Kenny stood very still.

"I know."

She turned toward him then, and there was no anger in her face now. Only the raw honesty of love that has looked one step too close to loss.

"I have only just begun being your wife," she said. "I am not prepared to learn how to be your widow."

He reached for her then, carefully because of his ribs but fully because anything less would have been false. She came into his arms at once.

"You won't," he said into her hair.

"You cannot promise me that."

He closed his eyes. "No. I can't."

That was the hard truth and the right one.

So he drew back enough to look at her and said, "But I can promise you this: I will not spend what God has given us carelessly. Not my life. Not our marriage. Not your peace."

Tears filled her eyes, though they did not fall.

"That is all I need you to promise."

He kissed her forehead. "Then I do."

They stood for a long while by the repaired shed, with the ranch behind them and evening gathering soft over the land.

When they finally walked back toward the house, the porch light had already been lit.

Warm.
Steady.
Faithful.

Ginny looked at it and slipped her hand into Kenny's.

"Come home, cowboy," she said.

And together they did.

Chapter Sixteen: *The Porch Light Still Burns*

Time has a way of proving what love is made of.

Not in a single day.
Not even in a season.

It proves itself in mornings and evenings. In storms weathered. In fences mended. In prayers spoken half-awake over coffee. In laughter returning after worry. In the thousand ordinary ways two people choose, again and again, to remain on the same side of life.

So it was at Sundance Ranch.

After the storm, the ranch settled back into itself, though not unchanged. A place never comes through weather unchanged, and neither do the people who stand through it. The shed was stronger now where it had been rebuilt. The north fence sat straighter than before. Tommy told the story of Kenny and the storm so many times and with such grand improvements that by the end of the month Kenny had apparently tied down the roof with one hand while quoting scripture into the wind.

"I did no such thing," Kenny said one evening.

Tommy looked unconvinced. "Well, it feels like you might've."

Jasper, leaning back in his chair on the porch, nodded solemnly. "That is how legends begin. Through the honorable exaggerations of youth."

Mateo, cleaning a bridle nearby, muttered, "And the dishonorable help of Jasper."

Even Ginny laughed at that.

The laughter mattered.

More than any of them said aloud.

Because after fear has crossed a threshold in a house, laughter is one of the first signs grace has returned to settle there again.

And grace did settle again at Sundance.

Not because trouble never came back. Trouble always comes back in one form or another. A calf was lost in late spring. The pump near the south line had to be dug up and repaired in weather too hot for decency. Bellamy continued surviving things no one believed had happened. Reverend Pike preached three sermons in a row on patience that were thought by some to be secretly aimed at Jasper. The world went on being itself—beautiful, difficult, holy, tiresome, and full of people.

But through it all, the life Kenny and Ginny had begun together took root more deeply.

The first summer of their marriage was a season of work and sweetness.

Ginny still ran Sundance Ranch with that same quiet authority that had marked her from the beginning. Marriage had not reduced her. Kenny knew better than to try. If anything, her strength seemed to rest easier now, not because responsibility had lessened, but because love had shared its weight. She no longer carried every concern alone in the night. If a gate broke, if feed ran low, if rain delayed, if some decision pressed at her mind after dark, there was someone beside her at the kitchen table or on the porch who understood both the practical cost and the inward strain of it.

Kenny proved true in all the ways that matter most after vows.

He worked.
He listened.
He prayed with her.
He learned when to speak into her silences and when simply to sit near them.
He found ways to make the house more his without making it less hers.
He still left his boots too near the back door now and then.
He still looked at her sometimes across supper with a gratitude so plain it felt almost like courtship had never really ended.

And in many ways, it had not.

There is a kind of marriage that shuts tenderness away once it has secured itself.

This was not that kind.

Kenny still brought her little things from the land—a smooth white stone, a feather, a bit of sun-bleached wood with curious grain in it, once even a single desert bloom he had protected all the way in as though carrying treasure. Ginny still smiled in that quiet deep way of hers whenever he did, and always found a place for such offerings on the windowsill or table, as though the ranch itself kept leaving love notes in his hands.

She, in turn, remembered what pleased him in all the quiet domestic ways that mean more than grand gestures. Coffee made the way he liked it. Biscuits kept warm if he was late from the line. A hand resting lightly between his shoulders when he bent over accounts. The lamp left burning if he had to ride out near dusk.

Especially the lamp.

It remained what it had always been, and more.

In the early days, before Kenny ever arrived, Ginny had lit it for herself—for courage, for company, for the stubborn refusal to let darkness claim too much ground around the house. Then it had become a sign to Kenny: you are expected, you are wanted, come home.

Now it was something even deeper.

A witness.

A symbol of the life they had chosen and kept choosing.

When evening came to Sundance and the porch light burned to life against the dusk, it shone for both of them—for supper waiting, for rest earned, for words still to be shared before sleep, for the promise that whatever the day had held, home remained.

Sometimes neighbors came to see it that way too.

One evening near the end of summer, Mrs. Alvarez sat with Ginny on the porch while Kenny and Mateo saw to some last task near the barn. The sky had gone all gold and lavender, and the first coolness of evening had begun to slip into the air. The porch light had just been lit, and it glowed softly beside the door.

Mrs. Alvarez looked at it a long moment.

"You know," she said, "people talk about that lamp."

Ginny turned slightly in her chair. "Do they?"

"Yes."

"That sounds dangerous."

Mrs. Alvarez smiled. "Only the usual amount."

Ginny folded her hands in her lap. "And what do they say?"

The older woman looked out over the yard where Kenny was crossing from the barn with a halter over one shoulder, moving with that easy strength and mild stiffness in his ribs that still lingered a little in damp weather.

"They say there is a kind of peace at Sundance now that was not there before."

Ginny was quiet.

Mrs. Alvarez glanced at her. "Not because the work is easier. Not because life stopped being hard. But because the light in that lamp looks different when a home is shared."

The words settled into Ginny's heart with the weight of truth.

After a moment she said, "I think maybe the peace was always here in seed."

Mrs. Alvarez nodded. "Perhaps. But some things need rain."

Ginny smiled and looked toward Kenny.

"Yes," she said softly. "They do."

The seasons turned, as seasons will.

Autumn came with cooler evenings and longer shadows across the pasture. Cottonwoods yellowed near the wash. The first time the air turned sharp enough for Ginny to wear her heavier shawl on the porch, Kenny noticed and went back inside without a word, returning with the quilt she liked to keep over her knees. He tucked it around her with such natural tenderness that Tommy, watching from the steps, groaned dramatically.

"I'll never survive this much sweetness."

Jasper, standing behind him, said, "You might if you took notes."

"On romance?"

"No," Jasper replied. "On quilts. Women trust a man with a blanket faster than a poem."

Mateo, hearing this as he passed by, said, "Jasper, you should never advise anyone about women."

That winter, on a cold night when the wind moved low and steady instead of wild and mean, Kenny and Ginny sat close by the fire after supper while the ranch slept. The porch light shone through the front window, blurred by darkness and a little frost.

Ginny had her Bible in her lap. Kenny had a repair job in his hands he was mostly pretending to work on.

At one point she looked up and found him watching her.

"What is it?" she asked.

He smiled faintly. "I was thinking of the first night I ever saw this house lit from the trail."

Her fingers rested between the pages of scripture.

"And?"

"And I knew it looked like the kind of place a man might rest if he were lucky." He paused. "I did not know then that the light would become part of my life."

Ginny closed the Bible and set it aside.

"Neither did I," she said. "When I first lit it, I only meant to push back the dark."

Kenny reached for her hand.

"And now?"

She looked toward the window where the lamp still glowed.

"Now I think it does more than that."

He rubbed his thumb slowly over her knuckles. "What does it do?"

Her answer came with the simplicity that made it beautiful.

"It tells the truth."

He waited.

"That we are home." She met his eyes. "That we stayed. That whatever this world has done to us before, it did not keep us from grace."

Kenny let out a slow breath.

"There are sermons in you, Mrs. Kenny."

She smiled. "There are chores in you, husband. Do not become distracted."

But later, when they rose and crossed the room together to turn down the lamps inside, both of them paused a moment before the front window and looked out at the porch light still burning against the winter night.

It had become one of the fixed points of their life together.

Not grand.
Not miraculous.

Simply faithful.

And that, in the end, is very close to miraculous.

Years from then, people would still tell stories about Sundance Ranch.

They would tell of Miss Ginny standing against Benton Crowe in the old days before Kenny rode in. They would tell of the cowboy who came looking only for work and found a home instead. They would tell of the wedding at St. Luke's, of the porch light, of the sandstorm, of the way the ranch seemed to hold a kind of welcome some places never learn. Some stories would grow in the telling, as stories do. Tommy would see to that if no one stopped him, and no one ever truly would.

But beneath all embellishment, the truth remained plain and strong.

Love had come to Sundance Ranch quietly.
Steadily.
Faithfully.

It had not erased sorrow, hard work, or weather.
It had not made life a dream.

It had done something better.

It had made life shared.

One spring evening, long after the storm and the wedding and all the first bright days of beginning had settled into the deeper grace of lasting, Kenny came in late from the north line. The sun had

already gone down. The western horizon still held a little red, but the ranch itself was mostly dusk and shadow.

Then he saw it.

The porch light.

Burning warm and steady through the evening, just as it always had.

He slowed his horse a little and smiled to himself.

Some things never lost their power.

By the time he reached the yard, Ginny was standing on the porch waiting, one hand resting on the post, the lamp warm above her shoulder. She had likely heard his horse before she saw him. She always seemed to.

"You're late," she said.

It was the same thing she had said the first night he came home after dark to that waiting light.

Only now the words had years of love folded into them.

Kenny dismounted and came toward the steps, taking off his hat as he did.

"I know."

"Did the north line hold?"

"Yes."

"Did you remember to eat the biscuits I wrapped?"

He smiled. "Yes."

She looked pleased. "Then I suppose you may come in."

He stopped at the bottom step and looked up at her in the porch light—the woman he had courted, married, weathered life with, laughed with, prayed with, loved in all the ways a man can love honestly and well.

"Mrs. Kenny," he said.

She raised one brow. "That sounds dangerously formal."

"Then let me say it another way."

He came up the steps, took her hand, and kissed her knuckles.

"Ginny," he said softly. "I'm home."

Her eyes shone.

“Yes,” she said. “You are.”

And together they went inside while the porch light still burned behind them, warm against the gathering dark, faithful as ever.

It burned for the home they had made.
For the life they had shared.
For the storms survived and the ordinary days blessed.
For the truth that love, when tended well, does not merely arrive.

It remains.

And at Sundance Ranch, under wide desert skies and through all the seasons yet to come, the porch light still burned.

About the Author

Kenny Sallee is a writer whose work reflects a love for faith, storytelling, and the enduring beauty of life in the American Southwest. Along with writing Christian devotionals and reflections, he enjoys creating stories that weave together love, courage, home, and the quiet strength of the human spirit.

Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch is a western romance born from inspiration, imagination, and a deep appreciation for the kind of love that arrives gently, endures faithfully, and shines like a porch light in the gathering dark.

Also by Kenny Sallee

Fiction

Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch
Book One of the Sundance Ranch series
A heartfelt novel of resilience, faith, and second chances, set on a desert ranch where love is rediscovered and life begins again.

Beyond the Porch Light
Book Two of the Sundance Ranch series
A warm historical novel of married love, refuge, and legacy, set in the American Southwest where a ranch house becomes a place of shelter, strengthening, and new beginnings.

Devotional Writing

Kenny Sallee has also written extensively in the areas of Christian devotion, prayer, reflection, and spiritually grounded inspirational writing, with a special emphasis on faith in daily life, hope in hardship, and the quiet mercies of God.

Other Works

A Quiet King of Fire
A companion work exploring the inner life of a man learning that strength is not found in control, but in love, surrender, and quiet courage.

Where the Desert Took Root
A reflective and poetic work capturing the spiritual journey of settling into a place—and a life—shaped by grace.

Coming Soon

Beyond the Porch Light
A sequel to *Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch*

The story of Kenny and Ginny does not end here. Beyond the porch light of Sundance Ranch lie new seasons, new challenges, and the continuing journey of love, faith, and home.

A Note to Readers

Thank you for reading *Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch*.

I hope these pages have left you with the warmth of sunset, the comfort of home, and the reminder that some of life's most beautiful stories begin when we least expect them.

Kenny Sallee